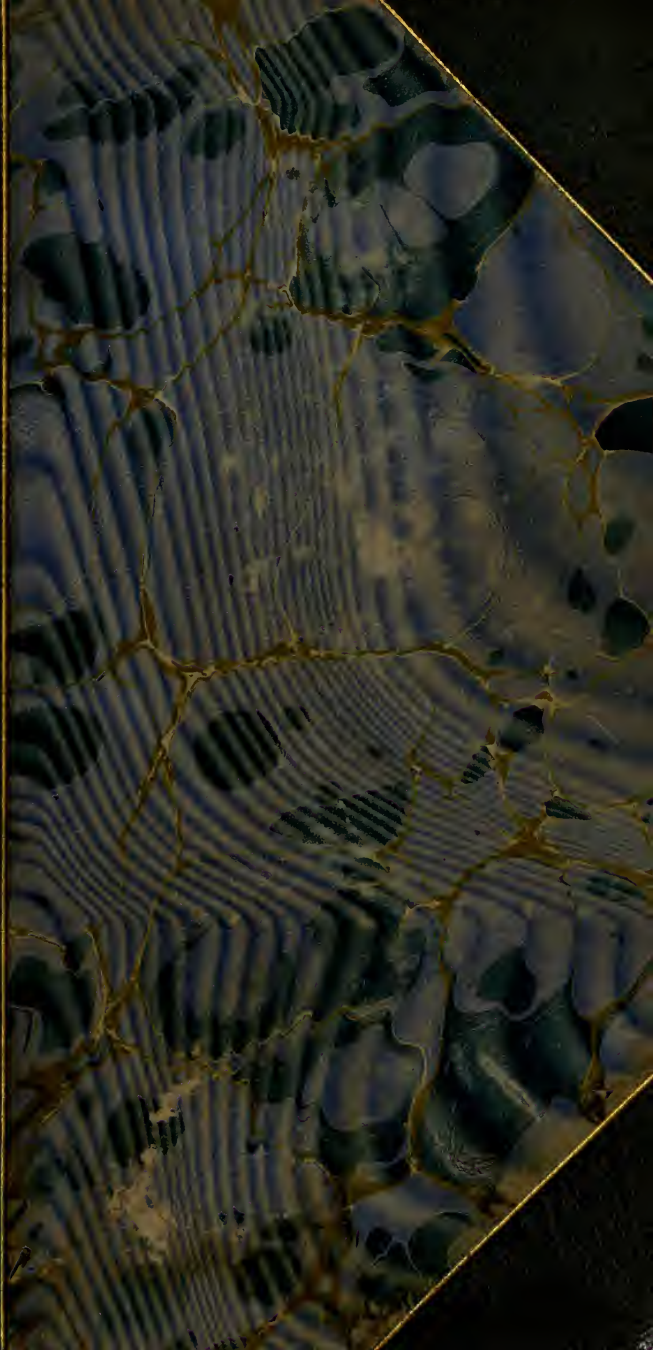
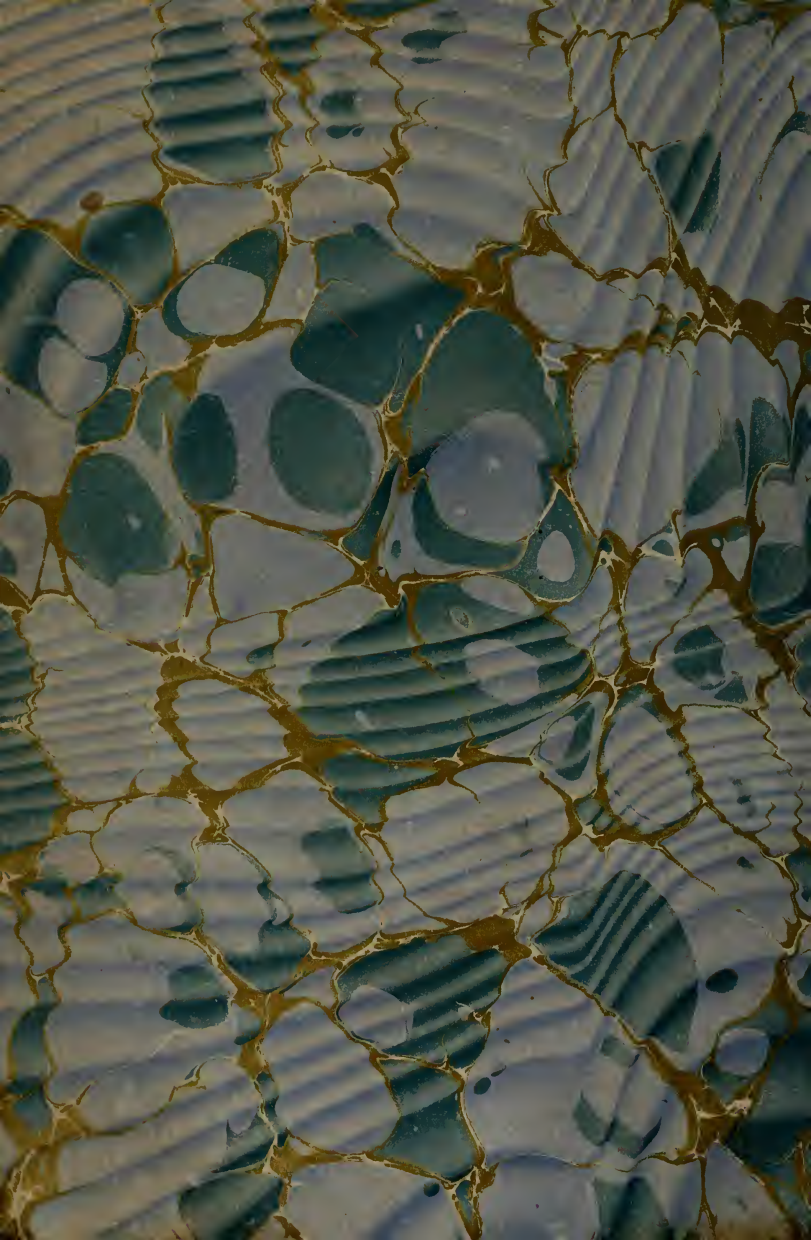
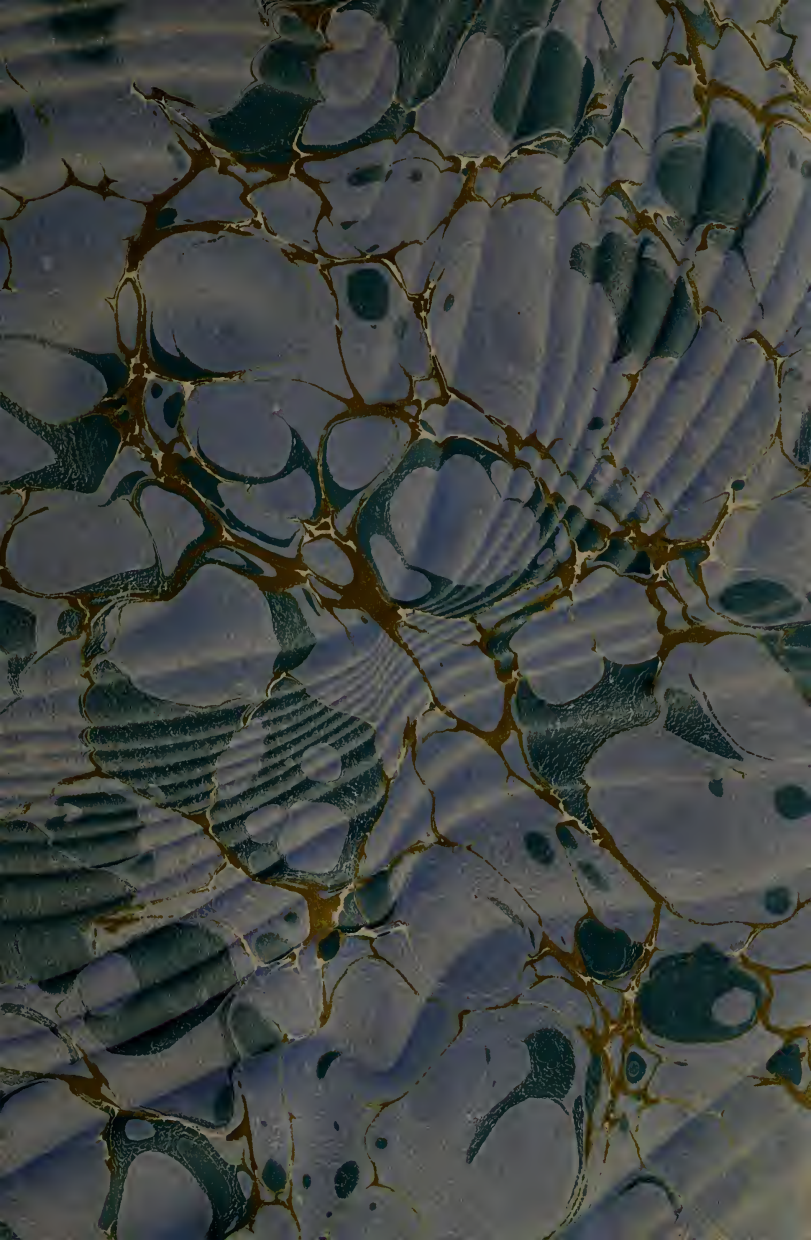


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JEDWOOD JUSTICE

A Novel

BY

ALBANY DE FONBLANQUE

AUTHOR OF

'A TANGLED SKEIN,' 'CUT ADRIFT,' 'BAD LUCK,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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JEDWOOD JUSTICE

CHAPTER I.

SETTLING DOWN.

DICK (we will not 'my lord' him except in company) was up bright and early, and went all over the house, finding little more than what was contained in Patsey's inventory. Having finished an excellent breakfast, he bade her sit down and listen.

'You understand,' he said, 'why I cannot keep up this house as others have done; but it suits me to live here for—for the present, so I shall furnish two rooms.

And I want you to make me a list of the pots and pans and linen and things I must have. Will it suit you to stay on and cook for me ?’

‘With all my heart, Mr. Di—my lord, and be proud to serve you.’

‘That’s good ! I shall want someone to wait at table and help you.’

‘I don’t want no help. I can do it all.’

‘I won’t let you. Never spur a willing horse, Patsey. Do you know of any light-handed girl I could engage ?’

Patsey thought she did — old Mrs. Wood’s niece, who had been parlour-maid in London and was now out of place.

‘Now for another thing,’ Dick went on. ‘Is there anything in the shape of a horse here ?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘Or a trap?’

‘No ; leastwise, nothing but the state coach.’

Dick laughed his first laugh as Earl Wadehurst. This state coach had once been a gorgeous affair, built for one of his predecessors, who had been High Sheriff of the county soon after King William’s memorable visit. Dick’s earliest remembrance of it was as a mouldy vehicular wreck, used by erratic hens for surreptitious hatching.

‘It was very considerate of them,’ he said, when his laugh was over, ‘to leave me the state coach. Well, I must get something rather more modern, and a horse. Perhaps I can induce John to give up his odd jobs and take charge of them.’

So he walked to the station, took the

train to Poundbridge, and went straight to Dr. Crawford. He found that his good friend Sam was now a full-fledged solicitor of the High Court of Justice, serving as managing clerk (with early prospects of a partnership) with Messrs. Scott and Malcomson, of London. He was to learn hereafter that those gentlemen were the legal advisers of Sir Horace Gault. Sam always came home from Saturday till Monday, and so he (Dick) would soon see him.

Then he heard for the first time the details of Frank's seizure and death. He listened with bowed head and set teeth, but when it came to the end and his loved cousin's last words—'Oh, my Dick! my poor dear Dick!'—were repeated, he broke down and wept like a child.

'I was on the sea then, doctor,' he said

in a husky voice, and drying his eyes, 'and the saddest man in all this world. I did not know for more than a year that I had lost him—in that way. You know, I suppose, that I have lost everything else except the title, and that is a mill-stone round my neck?'

* * * * *

The upholsterer—a new man—was delighted at the prospect of furnishing for Lord Wadehurst, and disgusted with the modest reality of his order. Next he went to the bank, where he was recognised (rather stiffly, as he thought), and asked about his silver. They showed him a book in which it was listed with great exactitude as to pattern, description, and weight in ounces.

'I haven't time to go through all this now,' he said. 'Please send me half a

dozen spoons and forks and so on for my present use. Perhaps I shall sell the rest. What do you suppose it's worth ?

‘ Much of it,’ replied the prudent banker, ‘ is very old-fashioned.’

‘ I thought there was a run on old-fashioned plate ?’

‘ That is so, only these are mostly of a date——’

‘ I see. Old enough to be ugly, and not old enough to be curious. Roughly, what would they bring ?’

The banker jotted up the totals at the end of every page, and replied :

‘ As old silver, by the ounce, about twelve hundred pounds.’

‘ Why, that's quite a sum !—a regular windfall to me, Mr. Brown, I can tell you ! I suppose I shall have to send it to London ?’

‘As your lordship pleases ; it is at your orders.’

‘Thank you. I’ll call again or write.’

His next visit was to the Rose Hotel, where he was recognised and given a hearty welcome ; for many a time had he and its host—Job Pedley—ridden side by side in the hunting-field.

‘I want a horse, Job,’ he said, ‘and I can’t afford to pay old prices. Something to hack about the roads. Do you know of anything that might suit me?’

‘I know of a horse that’s for *sale*,’ replied Job, rubbing his chin reflectively, ‘and he’s in my stable ; but whether he’ll suit is another pair of shoes.’

‘Let’s have a look at him,’ said Dick.

He had a good look at him all over, patted his neck, looked at his teeth, felt

his legs, and had him trotted out in the yard.

‘Now,’ asked Dick, half to himself, ‘will anyone tell me why a horse like that is to be sold for thirty-five pounds?’

‘I will,’ said a voice behind him, and Dick, turning, beheld a stout little man, with a face like a ripe crab-apple, and a large cigar in his mouth. ‘That there ’or—that horse,’ the speaker continued, ‘is handsome to look at, sound, and fast to ride or drive. He’ll go along the road like a lamb till he comes to a wheelbarrow, or an empty cart, or anythink—anything—on wheels as might have an ’oss—a horse—in it, but hasn’t. Then he will snort, and kick, and buck, and rear, and raise Cain. If there is anything a horse can do to be worked, and *he* doesn’t know it, why then it ain’t worth learning.’

‘You seem to speak from experience,’ said Dick, with difficulty repressing a smile.

‘Well, he’s my property.’

‘Then, sir,’ said Dick, ‘you are the most honourable owner of a horse for sale that I ever met.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said the stout little man, taking off his hat.

‘This is Lord Wadehurst,’ insinuated Job Pedley, shocked at the ‘sir.’

‘Glad to meet you,’ returned the little man, offering his hand. ‘Fine day after the rain?’ but he did not raise his hat this time. ‘Time was,’ he went on, ‘when I could have knocked the nonsense out of him’ (indicating the horse); ‘but I ain’t—I am not—as young as I was, and a good bit heavier, and my old woman—I mean Mrs. Applejohn—my name’s Applejohn, at your

service—my wife, she's nervous, and—well, he's for sale at half the money I give—I gave—for him.'

'Perhaps I might do something with him,' said Dick. 'He doesn't look vicious.'

'There 'ain't a finer horseman in the county than my lord here,' observed Job proudly.

'He's got to be, if he rides that brute,' Applejohn retorted, 'and there's a mowing-machine in sight. He was advertised as quiet to ride or drive, and had carried a lady, the property of an officer going on foreign service. I guess he got off pretty quick on his foreign service soon as he had my money in his pocket, or I'd been after him with a sharp stick. If he didn't lie about the lady, I'm sorry for her.'

‘You are indeed candid, Mr. Applejohn.’

‘If I worn’t—if I wasn’t—’ the little man replied steadily, ‘I’d give someone else the right to think of me as I think of that there orficer going on foreign service as pocketed my seventy guineas on a false warranty, and I wouldn’t do that for seventy thousand.’

‘Now look here,’ Dick said, ‘I’ll make you this proposition. Will you let me try him, say, for ten days? I cannot afford to buy a horse that will not suit me. If I can make him suit, I’ll take him at your price.’

‘Try him and welcome.’

‘Remember, Mr. Applejohn, that although Job flatters me about my riding, I have some reputation that way—candour for candour. It might damage

your chances of a sale if I had to send him back.'

'Suppose he breaks your neck?'

'No one would suffer,' said Dick sadly.

'Is it agreed?'

'Yes, I'm willing. I shall save ten days' feed, anyhow,' Applejohn replied, with a wink at Job.

Dick was puzzled. What sort of a man was this, who told the truth about a horse, and chuckled over saving a few shillings' worth of hay and oats?

A few days afterwards he met Mr. Applejohn again. He was fishing for trout in the much-litigated brook, and having fine sport.

'Don't you come too nigh,' said he, 'or your shadow will scare my fish.'

'Your fish? I was under the impres-

sion they were mine,' Dick replied ; but he stepped back not to spoil sport.

'How's that ? I pay the miller five pound a year for the fishing.'

'As lord of the manor the fishing is mine, Mr. Applejohn. I have very few rights left, but these must be respected. The miller had no more authority to sell you this fishing than I have to sell him your fishing-tackle.'

'Then I'm a poacher ?'

'Oh no ; it's a mistake ! If you like, we will go to the mill and have it out.'

They not only had the mistake out, but also the ten pounds which the wily man in white had pocketed.

'It's your money,' said Applejohn as they walked back, offering Dick the notes.

'Not at all—it's yours.'

‘I’ve had its worth, and more. If you’d been—been here, you——’

‘I should have given you leave to fish, sir. I do not sell my trout.’

‘Well, don’t be so stiff about it. If you won’t take the money, I’ll give it to the infirmary.’

‘An excellent object. I did not mean to be “stiff,” Mr. Applejohn. Excuse me if I seemed so, and come and fish whenever, and as often as, you like.’

‘There weren’t no lords,’ said the little man, ‘where I spent most of my life, only the governor, sometimes; and I ain’t—I’m not accustomed to the ways of ’em. I thought they was a freeze-you-up, stand-off lot, but I like you.’

Dick laughed.

‘I’m glad of it.’

‘You ain’t stuck up.’

‘I stick up for some things, as you know.’

‘Right. I’d fight for a threepenny-bit that was mine. What I mean is, you don’t think people dirt because they ain’t all dukes and counts.’

‘I take my fellow-man as I find him, Mr. Applejohn.’

‘Then,’ exclaimed the little man, ‘you come and find me. Come home and lunch. My house is close at hand, and the folks will be only too glad to see you.’

‘With all my heart,’ Dick accepted cheerily; ‘but where are you going? This lane leads to Wood End.’

‘My house.’

‘Why, it’s a school.’

‘*Was* a school, till I bought it. Come right in.’

As the latch of the rustic gate clicked

behind them, there came a voice from the house porch :

‘ Oh, you very bad man ! We’ve been waiting——’

Then there was a flash of white in the hall as Dormouse fled from the proud invader.





CHAPTER II.

‘THE EVENING STAR.’

AT the head of the luncheon-table—which was most tastily decorated—sat a lady with delicately-formed features and purely-white hair, who must have been a beauty in her youth. As she was some ten years younger than Mr. Applejohn, we must conclude that Time’s snow has fallen on her shapely head more from sorrows than from age. She received Dick as though in the habit of entertaining the House of Peers at luncheon by batches, and was in the act of introducing him to the girl who

sat on her right hand when interrupted by him.

‘Why, Dormouse, this *is* a surprise!’

‘I used to know Lord Wadehurst when I was a child,’ she replied demurely.

She did not speak again during the repast.

At its close Applejohn took his guest out into the porch to smoke, and told his simple history. Dick had noticed his habit of pulling up when he detected himself in some mistake in grammar or pronunciation. Doing this at table, he always looked at Dormouse, and got an approving nod and a smile in return. ‘So,’ thought Dick, ‘she is a sort of governess, after all.’ For the future I shall not give you the self-edited edition of Mr. Applejohn’s utterances, but render them straight.

‘I am from these parts,’ he began: ‘I

was born within ten miles from where we sit; and so was my wife—but I was a farmer’s boy, and she a lady. My father and my mother died when I was a kid, and I was dragged up by an aunt. I don’t know rightly what religion she had—Baptist or Methody, or what—but it was a stinger, and no mistake. It got things tangled up in my boy’s mind so that I didn’t know which to pray to—Almighty God or the devil. They were much of a muchness according to *her*. She gave me to understand that there was nothing for me but fire and brimstone in the next world; and as she made this one pretty hot for me too, I bolted. I walked to Gravesend and stowed away in a ship bound for Australia. The captain gave me a hiding when I was found, and a sovereign when we parted. My first job ashore was to wash glasses in

a bar-room, and—well, the Melbourne I knew then wasn't the Melbourne I left five years ago by a long way. I don't much think that a lad with no schooling, as I was, could land there with a sov., go to washing glasses, and make a fortune—*now*. Things were different, and I did get on. That sov. had a family of twenty-one thousand when I was a man of thirty. Don't you go thinking that mother in there married me for my money—though poor she was. Her folks came to grief by the bursting up of a bank, and she was forced to go out as a governess. She gave me the mitten over and over, but I worried on, and got her at last of her own free will—God bless her!

'We had seven children,' here the narrator's voice grew husky, 'so pretty—so pretty! Took after her—all of them. They

were like little stair-steps, one just a head over the next—four boys and three girls—and the youngest of all was running about stout and hearty, when it seemed as though a blight fell upon us. Our eldest boy was the first to go—such a fine lad, so handsome and so smart! and three others followed him to the grave in one wretched year. The doctors couldn't tell what killed them. There was no consumption or decline, or that, in mother's family or mine. They just drooped, and faded away, and nothing could cure them. After this we had some rest and hope, for we moved to another part of the country, and thought we were safe. Ah me! it came again, and we were left with only one, our first-born daughter—Estelle. Then I said, "For God's sake, mother, let us get out of this. Let us take her home. Maybe the fresh Hopshire air

that made us strong will keep the dear life in her." So I sold up, and came home, and after looking about a little found this house. You said at lunch that if you'd dropped down from a balloon in the front garden you wouldn't have known the place again. This is mother's work, and—and Estelle's. My lord, what a grim place it was when those old cats,' meaning, probably, the Misses James, 'left it !

'Our Estelle was nigh on sixteen when we came, and naturally wanted companions of her own age. The one she took to first and best was old Barbour's daughter, Stella—what made you call her "Dormouse"? Tell me by-and-by ! Well, they got to be like sisters, and they were like enough to be it, with all but the same name, too. Same soft brown eyes and hair, and quiet, pretty ways. Old Bar-

bour didn't miss one girl out of all his flock, and so they were together here three weeks out of every month, I should say, and fretted at that short parting. It seemed more like old times to have two about the house; but that didn't last. We've—only—one—now.'

He covered his face with his hands, and sobbed the last words.

'Don't dwell on it,' said Dick; 'I understand.'

'You can see now,' Applejohn continued, 'why mother's hair is white, and the light gone out of her eyes. An old weather-beaten chunk like me don't show it—outside. It nigh broke our hearts, and if it hadn't been for Stella—but I haven't told you. When we lost our last darling, we couldn't bear to part with—with the one you call Dormouse. It seemed, some-

how, as if our own child's soul had gone up to God and left this one's body for us to go on loving. She isn't—she can't be our Estelle ; but she comes as near to it as we can get. She lives with us now altogether as mother's companion—so they *call* it—and gets a cheque every quarter, most of which goes to her father ; but bless you ! she's no companion—no hired one, I mean. She's our adopted child, and when we die shall have every penny we've got.'

Here Mrs. Applejohn and Stella appeared, dressed for a walk, and the conversation turned back to the Dormouse incident, which Dick explained.

'The name is not in the least appropriate now,' said mother. 'The dormouse is a stupid little thing, always eating or sleeping. Our dear one,' laying a fond hand on her shoulder, 'is all that is bright

and active. She is the evening star of our lives, Lord Wadehurst ; our morning star has set.'

'Now don't you make yourself a stranger,' said Applejohn, as Dick took leave. 'It must be awfully lonely for you all by yourself in that big house. Come and see us whenever you've a mind. Come over evenings and smoke a cigar, and Stella will give you some music. By-the-by, how's the horse getting on?'

'Splendidly. He has a wheelbarrow in his loose-box, and eats out of it.'

'Eats out of it?'

'Look here : suppose you were a boy again, and you saw something that frightened you, and you got a licking for being frightened, and you saw it again—wouldn't you think something like this : "Here is that confounded thing I don't understand

and got licked about ;” and wouldn’t you try to run away from it and the licking connected with it ?’

‘ That’s common-sense.’

‘ Then suppose, instead of beating you for being frightened, they took you up to the thing, whatever it might be, and showed you what it was, and that there was no harm in it, you wouldn’t be frightened at it any more, would you ?’

‘ Of course I wouldn’t.’

‘ Horses are not as easily taught as boys ; but you can teach them if you go the right way about it, and the worst teacher of all is whipcord. I think you told me that a wheelbarrow was one of your nag’s favourite abominations ; well, he considers it now as an excellent arrangement to eat oats and hay out of. And so it will be with the rest of them

when he finds out that they will not hurt him. I do not think I shall send him back, Mr. Applejohn. I fancy I've made a good bargain.'

'Don't grudge it. Ride him up soon and let's have a look at him.'

The poor beast had not a bit of vice in him. He had simply been driven into desperation by fright and punishment. Long before the ten days were over, Dick could ride him up to a steam threshing-machine and make him smell it.

According to the laws of Mrs. Grundy, which, like those of the Medes and Persians, cannot be altered, Dick should have waited for the county magnates to call on him; but he argued thus: 'I am not officially "at home." I cannot entertain. There will be no harm in my going round

to those with whom I used to be intimate and telling them, in a friendly way, how I am situated.'

And he did so without any unpleasantness, and all seemed to be going well. He took old Applejohn at his word, improved his acquaintance with 'mother,' and Stella gave him Tosti in the twilight.

Even Mr. Barbour was civil, but took care not to commit himself in the absence of Mrs. Mac, who held him between her pretty white finger and thumb. Mrs. Mac was away at some German 'cure,' and until she came back and resumed her seat upon the social bench, no verdict could be recorded. He hoped that the result would be favourable to Dick, for he began to dream dreams in which his daughter appeared as a peeress, and (with the aid of the Applejohn gold) holding her own

against the despot of Fairlock Manor House. We do not, as a rule, love the people who hold us between their fingers and their thumbs. So in his capacity as a clergyman he had to sigh and say that Dick's conduct had been very, very sad, and in that of a merely human neighbour, to hint that bygones might be bygones, as the poor young man had been so severely punished, and was, no doubt, repentant. Thus he balanced himself on the top of the fence, ready to come down on what might turn out to be the right side.

Thus treated, Dick almost forgot the object which had brought him in such haste to Wadehurst.

Long before this, the old family lawyers, J. H. Wainwright and Son, wrote him a very stiff letter, with a 'lordship' in every

line, apologizing for their apparent neglect, and suggesting that, as the late Lord Wadehurst's executors, and also the chief legatees under his will, had done them the honour of retaining their services as solicitors, he (Dick) might—read between the lines—go to the devil!

This opened the way to Sam Crawford, who had already done good service by obtaining from his employers copies of the proceedings and evidence in the case of *Gault v. Gault and Birkett*, as prepared for the information of the present baronet, together with a statement of the reasons under which he sought (unsuccessfully, as we know) the intervention of her Majesty's Proctor. Bad reading for Dick! It made him set his teeth and stamp, and use bad words which he had learned abroad. But on the smart of it all would come echoes

of Tosti in the twilight, and of the dear voice that had given even that sweet music a melody of its own. Why stir up the past ? he thought, under this influence. Let sleeping dogs alone. There would come a whisper in quite another tone— ‘Disloyal!’ and he would recall those lines in the epic he loved :

‘ Ah, miserable and unkind, untrue,
Unknightly, traitor-hearted. Woe is me !’





CHAPTER III.

CUT BY THE COUNTY.

COLONEL DALY, always impulsive and fussy, thought it his duty to give a solemn dinner-party in honour of Lord Wadehurst's return, and bade the Right Hon. Alexander and Mrs. Macgruther (who had returned) to meet him. If there had been anything the matter with this lady, she did any 'cure' to which she might have subjected herself infinite justice. She gave Dick two fingers of her left hand, and turned aside to converse with the curate. She did not usually affect the minor clergy.

At dinner the social law placed her at one end of the table with her host, and sent Dick to the other with his hostess. When he joined the ladies in the drawing-room she avoided him pointedly.

He met her afterwards in Poundbridge, shopping, and had an icy reception; but Dick was not to be beaten off.

‘I wish very much to have some conversation with you in private, Mrs. Macgruther. May I call?’

‘I rather think we are going to Brighton very soon,’ she replied. ‘One of my children is not quite well.’

And with a distant bow she swept away to her carriage.

The verdict had been given and recorded. Mrs. Mac’s decision was that Lord Wadehurst should be cut; but to her surprise and mortification, it was not

obeyed as widely or as promptly as she desired. This necessitated further action (as discipline had to be maintained), and its result was effectual. It seemed to Dick as though a tap of iced water had been turned on him. Those who once were friendly drew back. Nine shoulders out of ten were cold ones. The change came on so suddenly as to take the delinquent's breath away. It spread over Poundbridge, Wadehurst and Fairlock like a flood, and he entered Wood End with a sinking heart, lest he should find its bitter waters surging there.

Fortunately for him, however, the Applejohns were not in society, as Mrs. Mac had declined to acknowledge their advent. For her they were 'some vulgar rich people from Australia, with an impossible name,' and did not count. So they heard

nothing about it, not even from Mr. Barbour—as yet. One haven of peace and happiness was still open to Dick.

One Saturday, when Sam Crawford came on his usual visit home, he received a note from Wadehurst, earnestly begging him to come over and see Dick at once.

He found him in his own room, looking as though night had misused him. There was a great smell of tobacco, and the writing-table was strewn with papers which Sam recognised. Dick gathered them together with a shaky hand, and made room for him.

‘Is it a mistake?’ Sam asked. ‘Did you mean to send for my father? You seem wretchedly ill.’

‘I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass just now, and I looked like a

drunkard ; but I haven't been drinking, Sam, and I want a lawyer to prescribe for what's the matter with me—not a doctor. The Wainwrights have thrown me over, as you know, and now my trust is in you. They have declared war on me, Sam. I am cut by the county because I ran away with Lady Gault six years ago.'

'I told you,' Sam replied, 'that it wasn't quite wise to come back—as you were.'

'I understand. If I had been rich, it wouldn't have mattered. Now sit down, and first of all tell me this : Do you think I ran away with Lady Gault ?'

'What's the good of discussing that now ? The thing's over and done with.'

'It is not over, and there is plenty to do yet. Answer me, Sam, like the friend you have proved yourself to be, and take off

the lawyer for awhile. Do you think that I ran away with Lady Gault ?'

'My dear fellow ! you never denied it.'

'I never had a chance. Let that pass, and answer my question.'

'If I had been on the jury, I would have found as they did.'

'It seems that I cannot get you to shake off the lawyer. Granted that you were on the jury, what would you have considered the strongest part of the case against me ?'

'Your letter to poor Frank. If that were genuine——'

'It was genuine—go on.'

'Then you simply gave yourself away.'

'Sam, that letter did not refer to Lady Gault at all.'

'Good gracious ! you don't mean to say that you eloped with another woman ?'

‘ I went away alone, but another woman drove me. Listen. I loved that other woman dearly, and thought that she loved me. Poor Fan ! Lady Gault sympathized with us, and helped us in many ways, for we were not allowed to meet. At last it came to this—no matter why—that I had to carry her off or lose her. Desperate cases require desperate remedies, you know. I had implored that other woman to take the one I proposed, and on the day I quarrelled with my uncle I was awaiting her reply, and Lady Gault had it. After that cursed row in Fairlock churchyard I couldn’t call at the Manor House, and yet I had to see Lady Gault. I did not think of any risk to her. I got over the shrubbery wall, and tapped at her window, and she came out. The evidence given by the servants is perfectly true. I

was almost crazy with anxiety. I did say, "Do not keep me in suspense—tell me at once." She told me, and it seemed such joyful news that I threw my arms round her neck and kissed her, just as I had done when we were children and playmates together. Not one word of love, Sam—on my honour—ever passed between me and Frances Gault. Then came the alarm and the hunt. Of course I beat them, but dared not go back to the Crown. I walked to Lordstone, and bribed my way on a baggage-train to London. All they said about selling out securities and getting money is true. I did it for that other woman, and she was false to me. I left alone, and I can prove that at the very time Lady Gault was seen to leave the hotel in London I was at sea.'

'That doesn't matter,' said Sam, 'if you

found her afterwards. Old Martin found you together in Mexico.'

'He lied. I never was in Mexico. I have never seen Lady Gault since I parted with her in the shrubbery that Monday night.'

'Then what, in God's name, has become of her?' exclaimed Sam, all the lawyer shaken out of him by this time.

'Now you have come to the point. You tell me this case cannot be reopened in a court of law for her justification and mine. She was a dear, true friend to me, and she shall be justified. That was what brought me here. I didn't care about myself—then. I have got to find her, Sam, and you must help me.'

'With all my heart. I never heard of such a case! If what you say is true——'

'If, Sam!'

‘ Oh, I don’t doubt your word for an instant. I should have said, if you can *prove* it true, it’s the most wonderful string of mistakes that ever was put together.’

‘ They will all go to pieces when I find Lady Gault.’

‘ Have you formed any theory about her?’

‘ I have. We know that Gault abused her that Monday night. Perhaps it ended by her being obliged to confess, poor child! the reason of our constant meetings, and that this satisfied him for the time. But jealousy of me was not the only thing against her. He had illtreated her long before old Barbour poisoned his ear against me, and it is very likely that this last outrage drove her to despair. Once before she left him, and took refuge with her father and mother, and they (God forgive them!) sent her back. My theory is that

she pretended to be satisfied, enticed him up to London, and then disappeared.'

'But she must have heard of the divorce proceedings, and for her own honour's sake——'

'She probably went abroad. A lone woman living in some obscure French or Belgian town doesn't see English newspapers. If she did hear of them, who was there to advise her, and tell her what to do? Of course she changed her name. She had to make a living. She may have made friends. Was she to say, "I, who have passed as Mrs. Smith, am really Lady Gault, and my husband is trying to divorce me"? No; I shouldn't wonder if she is as ignorant now about it as I was two months ago.'

'We shall have to begin our search without the faintest clue,' Sam observed.

‘ I don’t know about that ; I fancy I can find one. Look here. She came up to town to go to a grand wedding, and naturally had some jewels on her. Those would keep her for awhile, and then she would turn to—what ? Governessing ? No ; she hadn’t strength of mind enough to manage a three-year-old baby. The stage ? She sang nicely, but hadn’t courage to face the footlights. She was an artist in another line, and that she could follow. Do you remember those little pictures she used to paint—bits of hedgerows, with a bird’s-nest, or wild-flowers, or butterflies ? I had one at my old rooms in London, and a man who knew what he was talking about said it was worth twenty guineas. I shall go abroad, hunt amongst collectors and dealers, and when I find one of those pictures I shall find her.’

The haggard face flushed with excitement and hope.

‘I’m sorry to be a wet blanket,’ said Sam, after a pause, ‘but you’re mistaking the starting-post for the judge’s stand. Suppose you find the bird’s-nest and the butterflies, and get the name of the artist and her address, and she turns out to be the late Lady Gault—what then? You are bound to tell her that there is no way under heaven for her to reinstate herself as Sir Claude’s wife or widow, or to touch one penny of the money in her marriage settlement.’

‘I am not thinking of money.’

‘No; but the law thinks of very little else.’

‘More shame for the law. Go on.’

‘She would say, “That being so, my honour—in the name I bore—has gone to

the winds. I have made a position and a reputation here. I have nothing to gain, and much to imperil, by raking up the past." And she would refuse (and properly) to do so. If she refused for her own sake, you couldn't possibly, situated as you are, ask her to ruin herself for yours.'

'The blanket is awfully heavy and wet, Sam,' said Dick sadly. 'Is there any more of it?'

'We will suppose now that she did consent for her own sake or for yours, or for both — what next? She makes a solemn declaration of the facts (in which you join), and you publish it as widely as you can. It would do no good. Those who believe your word wouldn't require it; those who do not would say, "Oh yes, they have been living abroad, and she has

supported him with her brush! He got tired of her, or she of him, and they parted; and when he became Lord Wadehurst and is cut, he gets up this story. Rather late in the day, isn't it?"

'I'd wring the neck of any man that said so!' Dick exclaimed, the white anger that was in the Birkett blood twitching at his lips.

'Breaking necks isn't a bit of good, my lord!'

'Oh, don't "my lord" me, Sam! Call me "poor devil"—that's more appropriate!'

'Another thing,' pursued the relentless Sam; 'she might have married again by this time, and not told her husband about her past.'

'Couldn't I have that scoundrel Martin indicted for perjury?'

‘Yes. Where were you when he said he saw you in Mexico?’

‘In Denver, Colorado. I was travelling with a young Englishman who was soon afterwards killed in a cyclone, and as he had some things of mine on him, the reporter fellows gave him my name. I suppose Martin got at this somehow, or he would never have dared to swear as he did.’

‘Well. You would have to go to Denver, and hunt up those who knew you there, and bring them over, and pay all their expenses. Then you’d have to catch Martin, get extradition, if he were abroad, and so on. This would cost you, I should say, not less than two thousand pounds.’

‘I have some shares in a silver-mine that may become valuable; and Brown

says the family plate would sell for twelve hundred.'

Dick's face brightened as he spoke.

Sam started up and paced the room.

After some minutes of this exercise, which appeared to relieve him, he halted in front of Dick, and said with a gulp :

'You shall not ruin yourself! Why don't you give it up and go away? Wadehurst isn't the world—England isn't the universe. Go abroad where this cursed scandal can't reach you. As for Lady Gault that was, she has a father and mother; tell them, and let *them* fight it out for her if they like. You shall not ruin yourself for a fad!'

'It is no "fad," Sam. The dearest hope of my heart depends upon my clearing myself of this stain.'

Sam blew a long, low whistle.

‘Then there’s a —— But hold on a moment! Do you mind telling me who that other woman was?’

‘I cannot, Sam, in honour.’

‘You are behind your age, Dick. You ought to have been born in King Arthur’s time, and been one of his knights—the best of all!’





CHAPTER IV.

IN FACE OF THE ENEMY.

FURTHER talk with practical Sam Crawford put an end to the idea of indicting Mary Martin's father for perjury. They might send him to break stones at Portland for swearing that he saw Dick and Lady Gault together in Mexico; but that would not prove they were not together somewhere else. Sam promised he would think the matter over carefully, and try to find some way in which Dick might justify himself; and before he left he knew why that justification was so

sorely needed. I can tell you in one word—STELLA.

Dick came to Wadehurst with the chivalrous intention of defending his old playmate. He did not expect any trouble about himself. He thought that when the right time came he would only have to say, 'It's all a mistake; I went away alone,' and that this would be accepted as conclusive. Things had got to such a point now, that nothing short of absolute proof would do, and Sam had shown how difficult this would be to obtain.

Well, there was one chance open yet, if law and lawyers failed him. He knew that Mrs. Macgruther was the mainspring of the movement against him. What Mrs. Mac had done, Mrs. Mac could undo. He would appeal to Mrs. Mac.

He mounted his now docile hack (called 'King Pippin,' as a compliment to his late owner), and rode to Fairlock, for the children were quite well, and their mother had never thought of going to Brighton. He was going to 'bell the cat,' and hardened his heart accordingly. But as he crossed the bridge over the lake, a sudden sense of fear seized him, and shook his senses so that he reeled in his saddle and almost fell. 'Good God!' he gasped, when on gaining the land side the horror relaxed its hold; 'this is like poor Frank!'

Mrs. Macgruther was not at home.

'Never mind,' said Dick, now recovered and resolute. 'Send a groom for my horse. I will go in and wait. Here is my card.'

He knew his way to the smaller draw-

ing-room, which he supposed Mrs. Mac would affect, and waited.

Before long a carriage containing that lady and her children drew up. Some sharp words appeared to pass (Dick was at the window watching) between her and the butler, and then she swept into the room like an offended queen.

‘This is an unexpected—visit, Lord Wadehurst,’ she said, untying the orange satin ribbons which held her sealskin cloak to her waist and throwing it aside from a bosom which seemed to need room for its beatings. ‘May I venture to inquire why you have rendered my servant liable to be discharged?’

‘The man is not to blame. He told me that you were not at home, but I walked past him,’ said Dick.

‘The air of Fairlock Manor House

seems to have a special attraction for your lordship, especially at times when you are not—let us say *expected*.’

‘Need we quarrel, Mrs. Macgruther? Better not. I know I am unwelcome——’

‘Unwelcome?’ she interrupted. ‘How can Richard Birkett be welcome in the house of Frances Gault’s sister?’

This utterance, given with a magnificent gesture of disdain, struck home like a blow.

‘Is that to be your tone?’ he asked.

She had moved to the fireplace, and was drawing off her gloves with nervous twitches, her back towards him.

‘As you have mentioned your sister,’ he went on, ‘we will pursue the subject.’

‘It is a very disagreeable one,’ she replied lightly over her shoulder. ‘May

I ask you to get it over as shortly as possible ?’

‘ You read the reports of the divorce case ?’

‘ Yes,’ she replied carelessly, ‘ I suppose I did.’

‘ There was a letter upon which much stress was laid—a letter from me to my poor dear cousin Frank, which, when he was on his death-bed, was intercepted by my late uncle. The meaning of what I wrote was entirely misunderstood, as no one knows better than you do.’

‘ It was only a circumstance in the case,’ Mrs. Mac replied. ‘ They always rake up everything, you know.’

‘ There would have been no case at all without it,’ he replied firmly.

She smiled.

‘ You have forgotten, my dear Lord

Wadehurst—or perhaps I have. Let me see. Were there not too-frequent visits here, and ramblings *à deux* in the gardens, and meetings after dark, and letters handed on the sly, and whisperings coming out of church? I think so. And that ranch—didn't they call it a ranch?—where you lived together in Mexico?

'I never was in Mexico in all my life!' he interrupted hotly.

'Then why did you not come and say so?'

'Come and say so? How could I? That fellow Martin is a perjurer! He never saw me in Mexico!'

'Indeed! Where, then, did you take her?'

They looked each other in the face as fencers do, seeking in the flash of the eye a forecast of the coming thrust. He

waved her question disdainfully aside, and said :

‘ I never heard of the proceedings till two months ago.’

‘ You certainly kept out of the way very cleverly.’

‘ Grant me patience ! Can you look me in the face and say that I eloped with your sister ?’

‘ It is quite unnecessary for me to say anything on the subject, Lord Wadehurst. A jury and a judge have decided that you did. Sir Claude obtained his divorce and married again. That ends it.’

‘ Bertha !’ (with hot indignation).

‘ My husband’s name is Macgruther, Lord Wadehurst. It is not a pretty name, and when he gets his peerage he shall not take it as his title ; but at present it is *my* name also. I am Mrs. Macgruther !’

‘ I beg your pardon. I could not quite forget the days when you were Bertha Heath, and I—loved you.’

‘ Or said so, as an excuse to make love to my married sister.’

‘ My God !—*excuse* ?’

‘ Please don’t shout ! And let me tell you that in our society we respect the Third Commandment, however lax we may be about the others. We draw the line at swearing in a drawing-room.’

‘ But you amaze me !’ he almost gasped.
‘ You said “*excuse*”—when——’

‘ It was not a bad one,’ she interrupted coolly, settling her bracelets. ‘ People in your position who rely upon making up excuses off-hand are lost. You were too clever to rely on chance ; you made up your excuse and put it away for use when required. You pretended to be desperately

in love with me, and wanted me to jilt poor Mr. Macgruther and marry you ; and all the time it was my sister ! No—let me go on. If the shrubbery meetings were found out, or the letters seen, and Sir Claude opened his eyes and got jealous, and wanted to know what they meant, she could reach up to the little shelf where the excuse reposed all ready, and say, “ Oh, how wicked to be jealous ! He is in love with my sister. Papa and mamma have forbidden him the house. They can hear from each other, poor things ! only through me.” But, unfortunately, when Sir Claude opened his eyes, he didn’t ask any questions. He simply doubled his fist and knocked you down. The excuse is too stale for use now.’

Dick listened with bated breath, astonished, confused, almost frightened, as this

woman calmly and deliberately spun her record of his baseness and her own sister's shame. In a husky voice he began :

‘ You have effectually taken the girl who was once Bertha Heath out of my life, Mrs. Macgruther, by what you have just said. I can speak all the more freely on that account. and I say——’

‘ Excuse me,’ she interposed, turning with a queenly gesture of dismissal. ‘ I have already heard enough on this distasteful subject—more than I intended to submit to when I received your unexpected visit. For me it ends here, and now ; and I strongly advise you to let it drop now and hereafter.’

‘ You will do nothing to clear your sister's good name ?’

She was now seated by the fire, and warming one of her daintily-clad feet at its glow.

‘ My sister’s good name has gone like the smoke which went up this chimney yesterday,’ she replied in a low voice. ‘ I must think of my own.’

‘ Ah ! then you admit——’

‘ Nothing. Oh dear no ! You are too quick, Lord Wadehurst. I am thinking of the present and the future. It is not pleasant to have these things raked up, and for people to be set talking again over a family scandal that is dead and buried. And really’ (here she changed her tone), ‘ let us talk sense. What is there to be gained ? You want to rehabilitate my poor sister. You cannot — you, of all men, cannot. Do you remember a proverb which says there can be no smoke without fire ? It is about as wicked a one as ever was quoted, but people believe in it. You stir up this old scandal, and

someone will say, "Look at the smoke!" and then a dozen will run out into the street, shouting "Fire!" And what have *you* to gain? Nothing. The man in these cases gets off scot-free. I think I heard of your being praised for your pluck.'

'Do you know that my late uncle disowned and disinherited me on this account?'

'Poor, silly old man! Yes, and I am very sorry. Is it true that you have been unfortunate in other ways?'

'I have lost more than half of what I inherited from my father.'

'And are handicapped with a title! It is very sad; but don't you see that all this is a reason—if there were no other—why you should do what I—what I advise. Your only chance is to marry money.'

Let Wadehurst: there are lots of beer men and sham-butter men, and rich nobodies, who would pay a handsome rent for it. Then go to America; leave that scowl and your black looks behind you. Be the Dick Birkett of old times, and win an heiress. There are lots of really nice girls, with splendid fortunes, in the States, who would snap at your title and learn to love you. Then come back, turn the butter-man out, and *I* will see that you take your proper place in society.'

'Your power is undoubted there. I think I have already felt it.'

Again she smiled.

'Don't think me rude, if I say that I really have not troubled myself about you. I thought it bad taste for you to come back here, under the circumstances, and I said so—that is all.'

‘You have avoided me in a marked manner.’

‘One does not fly into the arms of a man who has seduced one’s sister.’

‘Thank you for that taunt. It has stung me back to my purpose,’ said Dick, flushing crimson. ‘You have been fooling me since first you opened your mouth. I came here to appeal to your good feeling—to your sense of justice to me—to the regard you should have for the memory of your wronged sister. Take care that I do not try what I can do on your fears for yourself.’

She laughed now.

‘*Fears!* I have none. You can’t hurt me, Dick. Do you like being called Dick again by a woman’ (through her clenched teeth) ‘who *defies* you? You could not say one word against me with-

out branding yourself as a scoundrel. You could not be a scoundrel, Dick. Take my advice, and don't be a fool !

‘ Your desire to get me out of the way does not quite chime in with that defiance, Mrs. Macgruther. There is, however, a middle course, which we will now discuss.’

‘ Oh dear !’ wearily.

‘ You can give out that, from what you have heard from me, there has been a failure of justice. That your sister left her husband, as she had done before, *alone*. That I was actually at sea when she was last seen in London. That, from your lips, would be enough to set me right here.’

‘ It is not so easy to blow hot and cold.’

‘ An admission that you have blown cold.’

She saw the mistake, and bit her lip.

‘Whatever stand I may have taken, Lord Wadehurst, I shall maintain.’

‘Suppose I were to find your sister, and bring you face to face?’

‘I should tell her what I have told you.’

‘You would not *dare*.’

‘Poor Fan! After what you have seen of us both! You are not a good judge of character, Lord Wadehurst.’

‘I have judged yours. There is no question as to its strength. But please to remember that there was a long correspondence between you and your sister about me, and that any scrap of paper in your writing, and showing its subject, would be instructive.’

She laughed—a low, cutting laugh.

‘There is no such scrap of paper, or you would have threatened me with it long ago. You do not know where my

sister is, or you would not have said "*suppose* I find her." This interview is at an end, and I trust you will not seek to renew it.'

She rang the bell as she spoke, and ordered Lord Wadehurst's horse.

* * * * *

As he rode back across the bridge, very slowly, pondering over his defeat, his horse stopped short, snorted, and shied at the very spot where the creeping horror had seized him on coming.

'Whoa! Pippin,' he said. 'At your old foolishness again! What is it?'

He looked around. The bridge was built to match the front terrace of red brick, faced with sandstone, with balls of the same material crowning the buttresses of every arch. The water below ran clear and bright. Nothing on that but the lilies

and a swan. Perhaps it was the swan. Following his principles, he dismounted, held out his hand, and the bird (accustomed to be fed) came sailing up. Pippin did not mind the swan, but stood trembling.

‘If you sulk at nothing at all,’ said Dick, remounting, ‘you must be licked.’

He smote him sharply, and got a new sensation. Instead of fighting on the spot, as in his unregenerate days, King Pippin took the bit between his teeth and ran away with him.





CHAPTER V.

APPLEJOHN'S IRE.

‘I’LL go to Wood End,’ said Dick to himself, when he had brought Pippin to order, ‘and take the taste of that woman out of my mouth. Good God! was there ever such brazen falsehood?’

Then he thought (as we all do *afterwards*) of what he ought to have said to her and done—but didn’t. He hitched his horse to a post in the lane, as usual, and walked up the garden-path.

In the porch, standing astride, with his hands deep in his pockets, and one of his

largest cigars (gone out half-way) in his mouth, Mr. Applejohn awaited him—not by any means as usual.

No cheery ‘Come right in,’ no nod, no sign of welcome.

‘It has come,’ Dick muttered through clenched teeth, and his heart fell.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Applejohn began, without moving, ‘before you came here, that you had run away with another man’s wife?’

The white anger of the Birketts was rising, and this made Dick deliberate in his reply.

‘Because, having found you a singularly open and truthful man, Mr. Applejohn, I did not care to commence our acquaintance with a lie.’

‘That won’t do. I’ve seen it in the newspaper.’

‘ May I ask who showed you that newspaper ?’

‘ Mr. Barbour did.’

‘ I thought so.’

‘ Oh, it isn’t no use scoffing at old Barbour. He don’t edit the *Times*. Besides, I’ve heard it since from a score of others. It’s all over the place. Some say it served the fellow right, for he was a blackguard, and——’

‘ He is dead, Mr. Applejohn—let him rest.’

‘ But that ain’t the worst of it. I don’t hold that any man has a right to run away with the wife of another man—blackguard or no blackguard ; but if he *does*, he should stick to her.’

‘ What has this to do with me ?’

‘ That’s shirking. I used to think you a straightforward man.’

‘ I will try to be straightforward, Mr. Applejohn,’ Dick replied. He thought of Stella inside, and humbled himself.

‘ Well, then, answer me straightforward. Did you marry Lady Gault ?’

‘ No.’

‘ Did you provide for her ?’

‘ No.’

‘ Where is she, then ?’

‘ I cannot tell you.’

‘ Is she alive or dead ?’

‘ I do not know ; alive, I hope.’

‘ That settles it,’ said Applejohn in disgust.

‘ Yes,’ Dick rejoined coolly, ‘ that settles it, because, as I did not marry Lady Gault, and did not provide for her, and do not know what has become of her, it stands to reason that we did not run away together.’

‘ *What’s that !*’

‘Straightforward speaking, Mr. Applejohn.’

‘You don’t mean to say that all I’ve heard and read—is lies.’

‘The blackest of lies, and the hardest to fight—half-truths.’

‘There’s no *half*-truth about abandoning a woman who’s trusted you,’ said Applejohn stoutly.

‘That is all a lie. I was referring to the pretended elopement. I did not elope with Lady Gault, and so all the rest falls to the ground.’

‘Well — I — am — damned !’ said old Applejohn.

Let us hope that he was wrong. He threw away his cigar, which was emitting the evil odours of departed fire, and in his practical way resumed :

‘What are you going to do about it ?’

‘I am afraid I can do nothing.’

‘Nothing! Be called a skunk before the whole county, and do nothing!’

‘I have consulted a cooler and, I must take leave to say, a wiser head than yours, Mr. Applejohn, and find that there are insurmountable difficulties in my way.’

‘I don’t see no difficulty at all. Sue old Barbour for defamation of character, and make him prove his words.’

‘I could not take any harsh measures against Mr. Barbour,’ said Dick reflectively; ‘but if anyone else——’

‘He’s the head of it, put up by that woman at the Manor House. You go for anyone else, and he’ll slide it off on Barbour. He’s a mean, boot-licking, scandal-bearing old fool, though he is Stella’s father. Barbour’s your man, if you mean business.’

‘I shall not attack Mr. Barbour.’

‘Then I know what to think,’ said Applejohn.

Here Dick made a mistake. His reasons for sparing Stella’s father were so clear in his own mind that he supposed they had struck that of the speaker; but the speaker was not thinking of Stella at all. He meant that, if Dick refused to take measures for his justification, it was because he knew he could not be justified. So, taking the wrong turn, Dick went on :

‘Knowing, as you do, how sweet and lovable she is, you cannot be surprised at my setting my heart on winning her. So, for her sake——’

‘What are you talking about? Whose sake?’

‘Stella’s.’

The truth flashed on Applejohn.

‘So,’ he almost shouted, ‘you come here with all that dirt clinging to you, into my house, courting that innocent gal! Well I never! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, my lord count, or earl, or baron, or whatever you be. No honest man would have done it.’

Dick, white with anger, made a step forward.

‘Oh, I ain’t afraid of you,’ Applejohn continued. But in a lower voice: ‘Come out into the lane, where the folks can’t see. I’ve licked as good a man as you, and I’ll do it again, old as I am. Come out into the lane, I say!’ and he stripped off his coat.

There is a comic side to most things, and good, honest old Applejohn in his shirt-sleeves, panting, perspiring, loosening his muscles, and administering preliminary

facers to the ambient air, robbed the situation of its gravity.

‘Pshaw!’ from Dick. ‘This is no case for a vulgar brawl. I did not intend to strike you, sir, I can tell you that much; and there is nothing else to be said. Good-day.’ He lifted his hat, and walked slowly down the gravel-path.

I should think that the first clang of prison bolts upon an innocent man would sound on his ears pretty much as the clink of the garden-gate, as it swung to behind Dick, sounded to him.

‘I wish,’ Applejohn muttered, slowly resuming his coat, ‘that I’d never seen him, never heard his —— sneering voice. *Him* to come after our Stella! a beggar like that! I’d give ten pounds to have one good lick at him, I would! But there ain’t no fight in him. He won’t fight

nothing. Just because he's a lord he thinks he's only got to say that black is white, for us all to swear to it. I was a fool to tell him Stella would have our money ; that's what he's after—money.'

Here a thought struck him.

'Money, eh ? Wonder if he *can't* clear himself 'cause he's so devilish poor ? Takes a lot of money to go to law. If I could be sure *that* was the reason, I'd——'

These reflections took him down to the gate, but Dick was out of sight.

'It's a bad job. Why on earth couldn't that old fool, Barbour, keep his tongue between his teeth ? Why didn't he speak out at first, if he was looking after Stella ? What's his game now ? Acting flunky for that cub at the Manor House. It's a bad job ! How shall I tell mother, and where the dickens am I to find a new chum ?'

Just here a pony-cart passed, driven by two old people, because, as the man had only one arm, the woman had to use the whip, which the pony, after his kind, required frequently. Applejohn greeted them.

‘ Good-evening, Mrs. Goodlake—good-evening, Corporal.’

After some remarks about things in general, the old housekeeper asked :

‘ Was that Lord Wadehurst we passed on horseback just now ?’

‘ Yes, it was. Don’t you know him ?’

‘ I did once, to my sorrow, but he has changed.’

‘ Not so much,’ said Corporal Byngton ; ‘ got sunburnt and that, but *I’d* have known him anywhere. There now’ (turning to his sister), ‘ you see I was right.’

‘ My eyes are not so good as they were.’

‘Look here,’ said Applejohn, ‘you ought to know all about it. Is what they say against him true?’

‘Why, all the county knows it is.’

‘He ran away with your mistress, Lady Gault, when you was with her?’

‘He did—poor lady!’

‘And then deserted her.’

‘Who says that?’ (sharply).

‘Never mind. Did he?’

‘No, sir; I’ll swear he didn’t. My family and his were not friends, so I didn’t see much of him; but I know lots about him. He wasn’t the sort of man to do *that*, Mr. Applejohn. There isn’t a mean bone in all Dick Birkett’s body—I’ll say that of him.’

‘But he did take her away?’

‘Lord, Mr. Applejohn! he don’t deny that.’

‘He does.’

‘What, *now* — after not saying a word for six years?’

‘Yes, now; and if he can lie about one thing, he can lie about another.’

‘You surprise me! There must be some mistake.’

‘No, ma’am. He told me so to-day. He said, “As I didn’t run away with Lady Gault I couldn’t have deserted her.” Those were his own words.’

‘Well, well! to think of it! They say one sin makes many. He used to be such an open, truthful lad. I’m sorry.’

‘So am I, Mrs. Goodlake, very sorry. I liked him. He made mighty good company, though he *was* a lord.’

* * * * *

The pony jogged on merrily, impatient of the delay which kept him from his

oats; and the corporal, relieved of the necessity of jogging the reins, began to talk.

‘ You gave in pretty quickly,’ he began.

‘ I had to, George.’

‘ Looks to me as if you’d all got the thing crooked. How do you know he ain’t telling the truth all through?’

‘ There’s no use talking about it. He *did* run away with her.’

‘ Well, if he did, that settles it.’

Then, after a long pause :

‘ Do you hold that a man who is in love with one woman, and got jilted, could take up with another a day afterwards?’

‘ He might, to spite her.’

What—the other woman?’

‘ No, you stupid! the one who jilted him.’

‘Then I’ll pound it that he’d spite them both. Get up, Bunny!’

* * * * *

Dick, riding slowly home, had also his reflections. ‘A nice day’s work I’ve made,’ he thought, comparing his two defeats—one at the hands of a woman cool and utterly unprincipled, but bright as the point of a rapier; the other by honest blundering, hot-headed Mark Applejohn. ‘I am beaten at both ends of the line, and it is useless to attack the middle.’ Then the tableau in the porch at Wood End came back into focus, and he could not but smile. ‘Poor old fellow! he was honest in his muddle-headed way. I should not have gone to his house, or any man’s house, with this cloud hanging over me. Thank God, Stella can tell him that I have never said one word that

could betray my love for her! The innocent child does not even suspect it.'

And he was right. She had not an idea that he *could* love her otherwise than as a child—he, the all-conquering Dick! The princes in the fairy tales which she devoured, coiled up in corners, in her 'Dormouse' days—even the good youngest ones—were not so grand as he. They depended upon fairy godmothers and magic things. *He* wanted no outside help. Again, the fairy princes would fall under the spell of some wicked magician, and be turned into all sorts of things, and someone would have to throw water on them, and say, 'If Allah did not intend you to be a dog' (or whatever it was), 'resume thy proper form.' Dick also had been under a spell, but was resuming his proper form without the aid of enchant-

ment. Remember, if you please, that good Mr. Barbour was still on the fence-top, so far as his position had been declared at Wood End. He, who had once ordered that Dick's name should not be heard in Fairlock, was being civil to Dick.

So she regarded Dick ; and not an idea that he could regard her otherwise than he had done when she was a little girl in a white frock, with a blue sash, came into her head, much less her heart. She liked to play and sing to him, because he seemed to enjoy her music. She liked to show him her sketches, and to hear him exclaim, ' I know ! that's the gable end of old Hooker's house, with the cherry-tree in bloom ! ' or, ' That's the turn in the tail race of Harden Mill. How well you've caught the swirl of the water ! ' She liked

him to suggest other 'bits' for her brush, and to carry her easel and her camp-stool for her, and watch her paint. When he spoke of the Wild West and his adventures there, she sat like Desdemona, drinking in every word with smiles and sighs ; but the 'delicate miracle' which sent Brabantio's daughter into the arms of her Moor had not yet been wrought.

Mark Applejohn, after a long conference with himself, arranged exactly how much (or, if you please, how little) he need tell mother to account for the necessary banishment of Dick, and of course he ended by blurting out everything. It was a sore blow to mother, for she liked Dick, and, as every woman is a match-maker at heart, had formalized a delightful future for him. Like Mrs. Goodlake, she *would* not believe the foulest of the charges

against him ; only, unlike the old ex-housekeeper, she stuck to her guns. 'No,' she affirmed, 'that is not possible. Perhaps the woman left him—he never deserted her.'

'Well, you've got to tell Stella something.'

'Yes,' replied mother sadly ; 'but I am afraid that whenever she goes to the Rectory she will hear it all.'

You may be sure that mother broke the bad news to Stella as tenderly as might be, and then came a further instance of the perversity (you can put another name for it, if you like) of the female heart. As soon as this girl knew that Dick was under a cloud, that he was 'cut,' and must not see her again, something rose up in her bosom and cried, shaking her whole being, '*You are a woman !*' and she loved him.



CHAPTER VI.

THE TRUTH.

WE must now hark back a little to make things clear. You may remember that Corporal Byngton found a lady's bracelet in the gardens opposite Mr. Heath's dwelling in the early morning of the day on which his daughter Bertha became Mrs. Macgruther, that it was claimed as her property, and its temporary loss accounted for at the expense of the otherwise larcenous under-housemaid. What you have not been told is that this trinket fell from Bertha's own arm in a struggle with Dick

Birkett. You have also to learn that, in the interval between her cry that she *could* not go through with it (meaning her projected marriage) and this day, she had been taken to see the house which Macgruther had bought in Commonwealth Gardens, and exercised her own sweet will about a good deal of its furnishing and decoration. Wedding presents had come in galore, and she had the happiness of choosing for herself what were destined to be the family diamonds. The sight of these alone was sufficient to keep down hysterical yearnings for Dick. But he had to be kept quiet and out of the way, for he was quite capable of rushing up to town in his masterful way, and having a row with Macgruther. That would never do. She consented to run away with him, and, keeping her promise to the ear, trusted to

good luck for a chance of breaking it to the hope. Besides, she longed for just one last taste of the romantic intrigue she loved before subsiding into Macgrudgery for life. So she appropriated an ulster belonging to her maid (thus laying the keel of the mistake which involved that highly respectable young person) and sallied out to the tryst. Dick was waiting for her, and after sobbing for awhile in his arms, she declared that she must go back to the house for a minute, as she had forgotten her jewels, and they would be poor—which was true. He consigned those gems to a bad place, and, swearing that he only wanted her, tried to draw her away towards the carriage he had in waiting. Here the bracelet was lost. She protested. Everyone was in bed ; the house was as quiet as a church at midnight ; there was no danger. If he

loved her, he would let her have her way ; and so on, and so on. She swung herself free, darted back like a hunted rabbit, *and did not come out again !*

Dick waited faithfully. No sense of fear that she would fail him entered his mind. He was only horribly afraid she might be caught. He passed the house slowly, and listened. All was still. The only light came from a window he knew to be that of her room. Presently it was opened, and something jingled on the pavement. It was an old door-key, with a scrap of paper tied to it, and on this was written, 'I cannot. Forgive me, and forget. I dare not.'

Now, I have to state that, in the mathematics of misery, when a four-power trouble comes on the top of a two-power trouble, the result is, not a six-power trouble, but a

crushing one of forty-two degrees of intensity.

Poor Dick, expelled from his home and jilted by his sweetheart, was almost frantic with despair. He knew he would only bring trouble on Frank if he remained in England. He loathed the thought of seeing the girl he had loved so well as the wife of another. So he fled *alone* on the way he intended to take with the girl who had betrayed him. In his trouble he did not think of recalling his letter to Frank—that most fatal letter! And, indeed, he had no time to do so, even if he had remembered it.

He sailed to Barbadoes, thence to Havana, thence to New Orleans, and thence by rail to Chicago, where in an old English newspaper he saw that his loved cousin Frank was dead. Well, then,

he might be dead too, so far as concerned anyone in the old country. He would live the rest of his life in, and for, the new one. He went out into the oil-country and into the front of the silver-mining, living a hard, rough life, and getting cheated, as a rule, in his speculations. Having turned on one swindler and chased him to New York, he found himself greeted by a travelling friend as Lord Wadehurst, and this brought him home. Then for the first time he heard of the case *Gault v. Gault and Birkett*.

Now, take your memory back to the time when Bertha Macgruther was sobbing, 'Oh, the shame of it!—my own sister!—the shame of it!' and learn that this burst of indignation was not wholly virtuous. True, she had thrown Dick over, but it was painful to think that his

fall had not hurt him. I have told you that she had personal experience of how easily broken hearts are healed. She remembered her hard struggle with love on the one side, and duty (accentuated with a mansion in Commonwealth Gardens and such a number of beautiful wedding-gifts) on the other, which preceded the throwing out of the key, and the tears she had shed over the note it carried; and indignation racked her at the thought that within twelve hours the object of this heart-quake had consoled himself with another woman, and that woman her own sister! That is why she was so hard on Dick, and wished in her hot anger that Sir Claude had killed him.

Later on, when she heard many, if not all, of the details surrounding the elopement, principally through Colonel Daly

(who, of course, happened to know all about it), she shivered in her high-heeled shoes. The 'dead case' against the fugitives, with Dick's letter to Frank as its keystone, had not one point in it for her. She knew why Dick had been so often to Fairlock. She knew what he went for on that memorable Monday night. She knew what his exclamation—'Do not keep me in suspense!'—meant. She could guess why he had thrown his arms around her sister's neck and kissed her. And if either of them came forward with an explanation, why, then she would be lost. Macgruther would never forgive her. By this time she had corrected her first impression, and was sure, in her own mind, that no elopement had taken place. Even the result of Martin's mission to Mexico did not shake this conviction. They had to do some-

thing to satisfy the judge, and this it was : Dick had gone one way and Frances another ; and Martin was an accomplished and elaborate perjurer.

This was evolved out of her womanly tact, and came remarkably near the truth. But she kept it entirely to herself.

When the decree of divorce was made absolute she breathed more freely. For some reasons (which she could not even guess at) neither of the parties interested had explained, and now it was too late for explanation. She felt safe at last, because, if either of them reappeared (or both), she could deny everything and defy them.

So the coming home of the new Earl Wadehurst gave her little uneasiness. She could easily (she thought) get rid of him with the reputation she had for assailing vice in high places. But Mrs. Mac in

London had means of asserting her sway which Mrs. Mac—a new-comer—in the county did not possess. County people are so stupid, you know. Some of these held a corner in their memory warm for the Dick Birkett of old days, and had not forgotten the peculiarities of Sir Claude Gault. The extra-judicial verdict of ‘Serve him right!’ against the latter was difficult to upset. Earl Wadehurst had been badly used by the old lord. He was only a boy when he sinned, and the sin had become ancient history. Even in Mrs. Mac’s world there is a statute of limitations for offenders—a sort of quarantine from which they may come forth fumigated and disinfected by time—and a nicely-organized system of winking. So why should not Dick be forgiven in the place where he had once been so popular?

Having thus only slightly winged her bird with the right-hand barrel, and being determined to bag him, Mrs. Mac took steady aim with the left, and fired a foul shot. With the assistance of Mr. Barbour she gave out that Dick had abandoned the partner of his flight; and this was fatal. It brought the Rector from his perch on the fence-top down to Mrs. Mac's side, but with sore reluctance inwardly. The Applejohns were reputed to be wealthy; and, living as quietly as they did, could not be spending a fifth part of their income. There would be a fine round nest-egg for their adopted daughter, and how nice it would be to see her a peeress! Besides, as has already appeared, Lord Wadehurst had a good living in his gift, which might fall in any day.

On the other hand, Mrs. Mac was a

liberal subscriber in Church matters, and had already got him a curate from some Aid Society. Her husband had influence with the Lord Chancellor, and her will was law. If he did not obey it, someone else would, and he felt sure that her displeasure would be like a fire of thorns well nurtured if he failed her. It therefore became his duty to inform waverers what sort of a man Dick had become.

The curate just mentioned is worth knowing. Well born, well bred, gentleman and scholar through and through, with private means (which held him independent of any Aid Society), he came to Fairlock, not because the work was easy and the position pleasant, but simply to win back if he could the health and strength that had been nearly crushed out of him in one of London's filthiest and

most hopeless slums. Heart and soul were in his Master's work, and every breath he drew of the keen Hopshire air was welcomed as marking a step back to it.

He soon took the Rector's measure to a hair's breadth, and (so to speak) could see his backbone through his shirt-front. Knowing his family, and being on intimate terms with one of his married sisters, Mrs. Mac had assisted in wiling him from his slum, and marked him for her own. But Percy Stanring was not a curate of the lawn-tennis, fetch-and-carry, pet-poodle order, and she was disappointed.

Sam Crawford had been at school with him. Through Sam he was introduced to Dick, and the three foregathered, as was natural. When, therefore, the cold wave came, Percy was angered against his old friend.

‘ I do not thank you,’ he said, ‘ for bringing me into contact with such a man !’

To which Sam replied warmly :

‘ You don’t know what you are talking about !’

And they would have quarrelled if Sam had not got Dick’s leave to speak out for him. Then these three put their heads together and formed a combination, which will have practical results.

* * * * *

Some few days after this, Dick came down to breakfast and missed the neat-handed girl (ex-parlourmaid in London) who usually waited on him.

‘ Why, where is Mabel ?’ he asked, Patsey now serving in her stead. Patsey equivocated :

‘ We can get on very well,’ she replied ,
‘ without any Mabels.’

‘Isn’t she well?’

‘She’s well enough. There’s nothing the matter with her but foolishness.’

‘I see. You had some fuss. Call her in, and let me set it right.’

Patsey prevaricated.

‘Now, do please, my lord, eat your breakfast, or it’ll get quite cold!’

Dick put down his knife and fork, and (metaphorically) his foot.

‘There’s something wrong, Patsey; and I insist upon knowing what it is! Call her in.’

‘I can’t.’ Patsey began to cry.

‘Why not?’

‘Because she’s gone!’

‘Gone! Left my service without a word to me! That isn’t fair. You should have told me what was the matter, and I might have remedied it. Besides, I owe her some wages.’

‘ You needn’t trouble your head, my lord, about her or her wages. We haven’t had no fuss, and she hadn’t no complaint—how could she? She was sorry to go—I’ll say that for the girl.’

‘ Then why, in the name of common-sense, has she gone?’

‘ If you’ll only finish your breakfast——’

‘ I will not touch another morsel till I know the truth!’

‘ Well, then, her uncle come and fetched her.’

‘ Oh, they wanted her at home, eh?’

‘ Yes, my lord,’ Patsey replied in a low voice, and turning her head away; ‘ they wanted her at home.’

‘ Is her aunt ill?’

‘ Not as I know of.’

‘ Patsey, tell me the truth. Why was

she wanted at home in such a hurry, without any notice or warning? I *will* know !’

Patsey sank on a chair, and threw her apron over her head.

‘I cannot!’ she sobbed. ‘I cannot! It’s too cruel, hard on me, that I have to tell these things! Ask John—ask anybody! I *will not*!’

‘I think I understand,’ said Dick, putting his plate aside. ‘Mr. Wood has been led to consider that my house is not a fit place for a decent girl to live in. Is this the truth?’

Patsey could not say no.

Now, this was done out of pure spite. Wood was the miller who had unlawfully sold Dick’s manorial rights of fishing to Mark Applejohn; and now he had his revenge.



CHAPTER VII.

‘GOD BE WITH YOU, DICK!’

NEXT to the defection of honest Mark Applejohn, this was the hardest blow that Dick had suffered. It proved how wide and deep was his condemnation, and how idle it would be for him to fight against it.

‘I am beaten,’ he groaned, ‘and must go. They are right; it is the only way!’

The ‘they’ in his mind were Sam Crawford and Percy, to whom he had opened his heart about his love for Stella; and ‘the only way’ was the way they had recommended. It was this, ‘No law, no

prosecutions. Find out what has become of Frances, Lady Gault, and satisfy the Applejohns. They are honest people, and will believe an honest story. Never mind Mrs. Mac or anyone else, and get out of Hopshire as soon as you can.' But he lingered on in some vague, faint hope of having a parting word with Stella. She might go to some of those places he had suggested as subjects for her sketches, and he haunted them. No Stella! The fact was that the girl had no heart for sketching. The sight of her painting-tackle had become hateful to her. It reminded her of the happy hours she had passed with Dick, and which could never be repeated. Once she had delighted in her art for its own sake; but now — what was the use of painting 'bits' that Dick would never see?

So he gave it up; packed his port-manteau; sent King Pippin to Job Pedley to be sold for what he would bring; wrote to the bank to forward his plate to London, and, having a racking headache, went out on Thorley Chart—the wildest place he knew—to try and work it off before his train started.

Thorley Chart is not a pleasant place for walking—flat and bleak, and full of worked-out gravel-pits and stone-quarries, over the edges of which the gorse grows and sets traps for the unwary. Thinking only of his troubles, and with his head in the air to catch the breeze, he nearly stumbled into one of these; and as he pulled up and peered down into the gray depth below, he saw something of the utterly unexpected.

Seated on a stone half-way down, with

her back to him, her elbows on her knees, and her head in her hands, was (his heart told him with a bound) Stella!

‘My God!’ he cried in agony, ‘have you fallen?’

This nearly brought about the catastrophe he feared; for she gave a start, as though he had shot her, staggered, and nearly fell. Another moment, and he would have jumped a sheer drop of thirty feet; but she held up her hand.

‘No—no!’ she cried; ‘I have not fallen. I am not hurt. I came to sit here and—and think. There is an easy path to where I am, to the right.’

He found that path—easily.

Now, this was exceedingly good luck. Suppose they had met at one of the sketch places, or he had overtaken her on the Chart—think of the embarrassment about

beginning ! What was he to say with such a heartload as he had ? Talk about the weather ? Was she to bow, and say ' Good-morning, Lord Wadehurst ?'

They were spared any common-place of the kind.

' Oh, how you startled me !' she gasped.

' I was scared out of my wits,' he replied out of breath. ' I thought to find you in pieces.'

At this she laughed. It was so like Dick—the old Dick.

' Do you often come here ?' he asked.

' Never before. I felt dull and restless, and thought a walk in the fresh air would arouse me.'

' Yes,' he said sadly, for a bitter thought struck him ; ' the air on the Chart is very bracing. But what could you find cheerful down here ? Were you hiding ?'

‘Hiding!’ she repeated. ‘Oh no! I suppose I felt tired. I don’t know. This stone seemed a nice place to sit, and——’ Then his meaning flashed upon her, and a painful blush stung her crimson. ‘I am rested now, and will go home.’

She rose, and held out a trembling hand.

‘Not yet, please,’ he said. ‘This is the last time I shall see you for many a long day—perhaps the last of all. Sit down again, for a few minutes only. I will not say anything that can distress you. I want just a little justice, that is all.’

She obeyed him without a word. She could not look at his face; but she knew it was quivering with emotion.

‘You have been told, of course, that Mr. Applejohn and I are no longer friends?’

‘I am so sorry—so *very* sorry.’

‘I do not know a more honest man. I have not the slightest ill-feeling towards him. He is doing what he thinks is right. I hope I am not leading you to disobey him?’

‘I do not quite understand. I——’

‘Then he has not forbidden you to see or speak to me?’

‘Oh no; he only said that you would not come to our house again.’

‘That is a most generous way of putting it; but you must know that yours are not the only doors closed to me. It would not be proper to discuss this with you. I can only say that I am a most unfortunate and unhappy man—misjudged and slandered vilely. You have a right to ask—you who knew me in my happy days before bad luck stuck to me like a shadow—why I do not defend myself. I cannot. I am

entangled like some wretched fly in a spider's web. I can make no defence to you now. Will you suspend your judgment for a little time—not long? Will you give me a chance to clear myself?

‘I am not your judge,’ she replied. ‘What one girl like me does or thinks will not matter.’

‘Let that pass. I have made my request; I most earnestly beg you to consider it. I will not press you for an answer.’

There was an answer ready, beating in her bosom, and it ran :

‘I believe you, Dick. If it were written in the stars, “Dick is guilty,” I should doubt my sight or the stars—not you, Dick!’ But her lips might not utter it.

‘So,’ he continued wearily, ‘there is nothing more to be said. I shall leave

by the mail train to-night, and will not return till I can do so—justified. Will you wish me good-bye ?’

‘ Good-bye !’

She lifted her sweet brown eyes, and he saw they were full of tears. Lightly detaining the hand she offered in farewell, he said :

‘ Good-bye means “ God be with you !” Does it not ?’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Will you say “ God be with you, Dick ” ?’

‘ God be with you,’ here the brown eyes fell, ‘ and grant you may wipe away this stain. And grant that you——no, I will not say “ stain.” Grant that this *sorrow* may pass.’

Why did he not fold her to his heart and kiss away her tears and comfort her ?

Sorrow and his sense of duty held him. He only laid his other hand on hers, and, in a half-choked voice, went on :

‘So that you may one day, in honour, ask the girl you love to love you.’

But this she could not repeat. Dumb in great joy and blind with tears, she bowed her head, and with a faint ‘God bless you, *Dick!*’ (it came out this time) she left him.

‘Have I gone too far?’ he asked himself, as he retraced his steps homewards. ‘Is it possible that she cares for me that way? Ah, no — no such luck; she’s sorry for her old playmate, that’s all.’

Thorley Chart is some three miles long, and varies from two miles to half a mile in width. There are exactly five trees in it; and these stand all together in a clump a

good way from the old stone-quarry. All the rest is flat, open heath. With a winter north-easter blowing and a high clear sky, it is a good place to breathe in ; but Stella found it too small, 'cribbed, cabined, and confined' for her and her joy. 'He loves me!' she cried, hugging her beating heart. 'He loves me!'

'What a colour you have, you dear child!' said mother, when she returned. 'Your walk has done you good.'

'So much good! I've got something to tell you two dears together, so come in.'

She perched herself on the arm of Mark Applejohn's chair, and made mother sit close enough to hold on by.

'I have seen Di—Lord Wadehurst,' she began with a plunge.

‘Hum!’ grunted Applejohn. ‘Where?’

‘Half-way down the old stone-quarry on Thorley Chart.’

‘And which fool was it who chose such a place as that?’

‘No fool at all, my dear. It was fate.’

‘Bosh!’

‘There was a time when the most enlightened people on earth believed that the Gods themselves could not struggle against the Fates.’

‘I don’t want no heathenish talk. Let’s have some sense.’

‘What did he say?’ This from mother.

‘Stop a minute. I’ve not done about fate. I did not want to see Lord Wadehurst, and I have carefully avoided every place where it was probable I might meet him. I went to-day to the most unlikely spot in all Hopshire, and sat down to rest

where you couldn't have found me in a day's hunt. And yet he walked straight up to where I was! If that isn't fate, what is it?'

'He watched and followed you.'

'Oh no. There was not a soul in sight when I went down the quarry, and I had been there more than half an hour when he came. He thought I was hiding from him.'

'Then he should have gone on, and left you alone!' growled Applejohn.

'Perhaps he might have done so, but he thought I had fallen and was hurt.'

'Good job if he'd a-fallen in and broke his neck.'

'Father, that's not like you! Go on, my dear.' Mother, woman-like, scented a love-passage, and was interested.

'He told me,' said Stella, 'that he was

a most unhappy man, condemned unjustly, and he begged me to give him time to clear himself.'

'Wants another six years, I suppose.'

'Please don't interrupt her, father. Go on, Stella dear.'

'He'd no right,' Applejohn insisted, 'to speak to any young girl on a subject like that!'

'How little you know him! He did not say one word on the subject itself—did not even mention a name. He asked me to say "God be with you, and grant that this sorrow may pass!" And I said so.'

'Is that all?'

'All I said. He wanted me to add, "So that you can some day, in honour, ask the girl you love to love you;" but I couldn't, and we parted.'

‘I like his cheek,’ blustered Applejohn. ‘And now let me tell you, straight out, no such man as him shall talk love to any gal that *I* have anything to do with. If any gal I have anything to do with talks love to *him*, she’s got to choose betwixt us—him or me, not both.’

He pushed Stella from his chair-arm, and walked the room, very red in the face.

‘I have told you the truth, just as if you were my own father,’ replied Stella sadly. ‘I do not think you should be angry with me for that.’

‘I ain’t. I’m angry because you—because that fellow dared—— Great Scot! am I blind? Do you think it wants a oxy-hydrogen gas-reflecting microscope to see through you both? I’m no fool.’

‘No, you dearest dear,’ laughed Stella, throwing her arms around his neck, and

checking him in his wild career ; ‘ you are as clever as you can be, and that is exactly why you will one day be glad to beg Lord Wadehurst’s pardon.’

‘ Never !’

‘ Oh yes, you will ’ (coaxingly).

‘ Never !’ (hands down in pockets).

‘ Not if he comes back *in honour—as he will*’ (proudly).

‘ My little girl,’ said the old man tenderly, moved by her earnestness, ‘ my pretty one ! don’t you bank on that — don’t do it. I know, and so does mother, that we can’t expect to keep you to ourselves always—’tain’t in nature ; and if a good man comes along, and wants you for his wife, and you love him, why, we’ve got to put up with it, somehow, and you shan’t want for nothing whilst we live ; and when we’ve gone you’ll be rich. Only

let it be a *good* man, Stella, my dear. Don't waste one little sigh of your sweet heart on a black sheep.'

Stella kissed him.

'You shall beg my pardon,' she said with mock severity, 'for daring to give me such a warning, when Dick comes home in honour.'

'D—— if she didn't call him "Dick"!' shouted Applejohn, relapsing. 'Did you hear her, mother? She called him "Dick"!'.

'I heard her,' mother replied quietly. 'The child is thinking of him as he used to be thought of, and so far as I have heard, no young man's name stood higher here than his used to do. You cannot drag these old feelings up by the roots like a weed in wet weather. Besides, there is one thing said against the poor fellow

which I will not believe. Let us give him time to disprove the other.'

'What!' roared her husband, 'you're against me too?'

'Not against *you*, dear Mark, but against injustice.'

Stella sprang at her like a young panther, and burst into tears upon her bosom.





CHAPTER VIII.

SEVERAL MISTAKES.

WHEN Stella's figure faded from his sight, Dick—standing as high as he could on the verge of the old quarry to see the very last flutter of her dress—had a happy thought, which took him a little out of his homeward way to Mrs. Goodlake's cottage.

The old couple were early diners. He found the Corporal smoking his pipe on one side of the fire, and the ex-housekeeper knitting sleepily on the other.

'I have come,' he said, 'Mrs. Goodlake, to ask your kind assistance on a matter of

serious importance to me, and I will tell you at once what it is. I want to find your old mistress, Lady Gault.'

Remembering her conversation with Mark Applejohn on this subject, she replied stiffly :

'Your lordship should begin your inquiries where you left her.'

'That was in the shrubbery at the Manor House, where you were living. So, you see, I am taking your advice.'

I will not repeat what he then told her, because we have heard it several times already. He struck at the tap-root. Lady Gault had left her husband, but not with him.

'Now,' he continued, when this explanation was made, 'can you name any friends, outside of her own family, with whom she might have taken refuge?'

‘I was never in her confidence, poor lady! She used to have some visitors staying in the house at first; but—no, I cannot think of anyone.’

‘Did she get letters with foreign stamps on them?’

‘I never touched the mail-bags; that was the butler’s work.’

‘Do you know where he is living now?’

‘He got a place with some judge in London when the house was shut up; but I don’t know where he is now.’

‘Please tell me his name.’

‘Patrick Halsey.’

‘When Sir Claude and Lady Gault went to London the day of Miss Heath’s wedding, did they take any luggage?’

‘My lady had her dressing-bag—that was all.’

‘ You supposed that they were only going up for the day ?’

‘ Of course. Why, the carriage was ordered to meet them by the evening train—six-fifty I think it was then.’

‘ Did Sir Claude come back ?’

‘ Never. And I do believe, my lord, his poor head was turned crazy from that day. He never behaved like a man in his senses. What was the first thing he did? Bear in mind, if you please, that I had been—girl, wife, and widow—forty-five years in the family. I was housekeeper; the lady’s-maid—that Mary Martin—had left. He wanted all my lady’s things—clothes, letters, jewellery, papers, *everything*—packed up and sent to London; and who do you think was to do it, and *I* in the house—why, Mr. Spaulding, the groom! He came from

London on purpose. Nice to have a lady's wardrobe pulled about by a stable-man, wasn't it ?'

'Do you know if he found all her jewels ?'

'I know nothing about him,' replied Mrs. Goodlake, with a contemptuous sweep of the hand, 'or what he did, or what he found, or what he stole. He brought me a written order from Sir Claude, and I was not responsible.'

'Tell me this : did you go into Lady Gault's rooms afterwards ?'

'Of course I did. I was not discharged for a long time after that. I used to go into every room in the house once a week, to see that all was clean and tidy.'

'Well, was anything broken open ?'

'Broken open ?'

‘Yes—any drawers, or wardrobes, or desks?’

‘Why should he break them open when he had the keys?’

‘That is exactly what I was coming to,’ said Dick. ‘How do you know he had the keys?’

‘He must have had them. Every door was open, and nothing—now you ask me—was broken. I never gave it a thought before.’

‘Does it not strike you as rather odd that they should have Lady Gault’s keys?’

‘It does now. Perhaps she left them behind in her dressing-bag?’

‘The report is that she was carrying this bag the last time she was seen.’

‘Mary Martin might have had them. The trust she put in that—that girl, poor

lady! poor lady! and all the time she was a snake in the grass, false to everything, false even to that Spaulding, and he put up with it! A pretty pair!

‘I cannot understand why Sir Claude should have dismissed Martin, if there existed the intimacy which you seem to suggest.’

‘Just an excuse to get the hussy up to London.’

‘He was searching for his wife at that time, and her maid might have been of invaluable assistance to those he employed. He could have sent for her. The stigma of a discharge was quite unnecessary, especially when we consider what took place afterwards. Why should he antagonize so valuable a witness? He was trying to hush up the scandal—why make an enemy of the woman who could expose

it at any moment? No, Mrs. Goodlake, there is something about this that we cannot explain at present, and what followed makes it very suspicious. So far, Sir Claude was, I think, acting honestly. Don't you see that they would not have gone together as they did to Mrs. Macgruther's wedding if she had not explained my—my conduct towards her, and relieved herself from blame? They were good friends on the Wednesday morning. I dare say he made some promise which he did not keep, and bullied her at the hotel; or it may be that she only pretended to be reconciled, as an excuse for getting to London and so escaping from him. Anyhow, she did escape, and he tried to get her back. He must have known then that she had not eloped with me.'

‘ Dear, dear ! what *am* I to think ?’

‘ Think the best, Mrs. Goodlake, which in my case is bad enough. Think that this poor lady, driven to despair, abandoned by her family, without a friend in the world, fled from her misery—*alone*.’

‘ God help her ! She may have made away with herself.’

‘ No ; she was too good a woman. Besides, she need not have gone to London for *that*. I shall find her, alive or dead, or there is no justice under heaven. Now, like a dear good soul, rack your brains and think if you cannot give me some clue.’

‘ I would, with all my heart, Lord Wadehurst, but I cannot. She never spoke to me about herself. I had many times to excuse poor Sir Claude, and I may have told lies for him. I nursed him as a child,

and his mother made a friend of me as much as she could with a servant. You can't serve one family for five-and-forty years without standing up for them, and I'm afraid my last lady thought I wasn't just to her. And then there was Mary Martin ; she—— Well now, why not ask her—if you could so demean yourself? She was more like a companion than a maid ; and the airs she gave herself ! One day——'

'I'll take your word for it ; but there is little to hope for in that quarter. Don't you see that it is her interest to maintain the validity of the divorce ? She wouldn't say a word that could help me, or her present husband either.'

'Spaulding is a rascal !' Mrs. Goodlake exclaimed, as though the sound of his name stung her ; 'and I know it. I

warned him once about servants prying into their masters' and mistresses' affairs, and I remember what he said, and how he said it. They're properly mated, that pair of sneaks and spies. I'll never forgive them—never !

Corporal Byngton left the room at the commencement of this conversation, being (as I have before observed) a man of much discretion. He retired into the kitchen, and, as the cottage was a small one, may have overheard what passed. He reappeared in time to open the front door for Dick, who nodded thanks and passed on ; but the Corporal followed.

‘ You don't remember me, my lord ? ’ he asked.

‘ No, indeed I do not. ’

‘ I was a commissionaire in London before sister Jane came here, and had

charge of Winchester Gardens. I've seen you playing lawn-tennis there many times.'

'That was long ago.'

'Eight years ago it began. You used to play a good deal with Miss Bertha Heath—Mrs. Macgruther that is.'

'Why do you remind me of this?' asked Dick sharply, for the remembrance was not a pleasant one.

'Just to show your lordship I've a good memory. I remember both the marriages in Mr. Heath's family—Miss Frances's and Miss Bertha's. You were not at Miss Bertha's, were you? Well, that has turned out all right, but I was mortal sorry about poor Miss Frances, for she was good to me once when I was off duty sick. If it hadn't been for her I should have lost my place. She was a good, kind-hearted young lady.'

‘You know what they say about her—and me?’

‘Yes, I know. It’s been talked about enough for everybody to know, but I don’t believe it.’

Now, Dick was under the belief that this man had followed him for a ‘tip.’ In his school days, when he was not a poor peer, he indulged in the reprehensible habit of scattering half-crowns, and had not quite got over it. He would have liked to tip the Corporal for that ‘I don’t believe it,’ but, as a matter of fact, had not a penny in his pocket, for there is nothing to be bought or paid in a walk on Thorley Chart. This worried him, and when your average Englishman is worried he talks ‘short.’ At any rate, that was the Corporal’s word for it. He expected to be asked ‘Why?’—*i.e.*, why don’t you believe

it?—and this question might have led to important disclosures ; but it came not.

Dick did not think of asking why. He supposed that Byngton was grateful to the girl who had been kind to him, and would not believe any bad of *her* ; and so Dick went his way.

The post had just come in when he reached home, and there was a letter with United States stamps on it for him. He opened it, and the gloom upon his face lifted. Then a puzzled look came. ‘Impossible!’ he said to himself; ‘you are prodigal with your noughts, friend Hankin. Oh, I see; you haven’t ticked off your cents. The last two noughts stand for cents. He means one thousand eight hundred dollars (\$1,800 00), no cents. Well, that’s good enough, considering that the shares were worth nothing at all when

I left ; but I'll never believe that the mines are not—— What's this ? “ Remitted by this mail bill on Brown Brothers for——” ’ Dick turned sick as he read. No deceptive ciphers this time—the sum was written in words. The Mariposa silver-mine had ‘panned out’ at last. Lord Wadehurst had one hundred and eighty thousand dollars to his credit, *and more to come* on account of his share—three-fourths—of the stock.

* * * * *

‘ You were right, George,’ said Mrs. Goodlake to her brother, when he returned : ‘ I did give in too quickly.’

The Corporal's reply was a grunt. He was evidently put out by something.

‘ He's an ill-used man,’ said Mrs. Goodlake.

‘ He's a d——d fool !’ said her brother.

‘ Oh, George ! you promised to leave off swearing.’

‘ Can’t help it !’

‘ You don’t try !’

‘ I do try ; d——d hard, too !’

‘ There, again !’

‘ Yes, and it’ll be again and again if you don’t stop talking about him ! It puts me out of all temper to see such foolishness !’

‘ George, I believe you know more about this than you pretend.’

‘ I don’t *pretend* !’

‘ Well, then, tell me.’

A cunning twinkle came into the Corporal’s eyes.

‘ I can help him,’ he replied, ‘ if he wants to be helped ; but it don’t look as if he did. What’s the good of my getting myself into trouble about what don’t concern me, when the man it does concern

stands by and won't do nothing? I dangled the bait right under his nose just now, and he says "Thank you," and walks on. No, I shall keep what I know to myself till the right time comes, Sister Jane!

Mrs. Goodlake looked at him over her spectacles, and knew from his manner that 'the incident was closed.'

'I heard this morning,' she said, after a long pause, 'that old Mr. Piper is in a bad way.'

This Mr. Piper held a small post under the Inland Revenue Office (issuing gun-licenses and such-like), the emoluments of which came to some forty pounds a year, and he was very old and feeble. Corporal Byngton had an eye to the succession, but so far took no steps towards trying on the dying man's shoes.

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘Dr. Crawford says he can’t last out the week. It’s about time for me to be doing something.’

‘Why didn’t you speak to Lord Wadehurst about it when he was here?’

‘Lord Wadehurst ain’t no use.’

‘It’s a Wadehurst post, and he’s lord of the manor!’

‘Lord of nothing! I know someone who could get me the place by holding up her finger!’

‘*Her* finger? What! Mrs. Daly?’

‘Mrs. Daly—no. Mrs. Macgruther.’

‘She’s Fairlock.’

‘That don’t matter. She’s London. That’s where the influence is.’

‘I don’t like Mrs. Macgruther, George. She was very insulting to me when I applied for my old place.’

‘That was before I came here,’ said the

Corporal. 'I don't think she'll insult me. I hope not, for I hate to be a burden on you, Sister Jane.'

'Burden? You mustn't use such a word! How could I get along without you, lone woman that I am!'





CHAPTER IX.

‘ IS THIS BLACK-MAILING ?’

MRS. MAC appropriated one hour a week on Tuesday, from eleven to twelve, for receiving petitioners and considering applications for her bounty and good grace. Corporal Byngton was admitted in his turn, and found her seated at a perfectly-appointed writing-table, blotting off her notes respecting the preceding case. She was dressed in a purple velvet tea-gown, foaming with delicate lace at every edge, and was looking her best.

If there be a female side to the proverb

which declares that no man is a hero to his valet, I do not think that Mrs. Mac's maid could be relied upon as a witness to its truth. Bountiful nature made her independent of outward aids, and inside she was a very cautious lady. Starting with the theory that great successes are made up by avoiding small mistakes, she never threw away a chance. To quote another proverb, she held it better to have the good will of a dog than the bad one. Thus it is that we find her receiving rheumatic old women and worn-out labourers—she clad in purple and fine linen, sitting in a boudoir fit for a princess, and smiling graciously. Suppose the carpet did suffer, the value of a new one would come over and over again out of the goodwill thus gained. This manner of giving added a premium to what she gave, and disappoint-

ment was discounted. Great persons of either sex, who treat those who seek their aid as though they were 'night charges' at a police-court, will please take note of this.

There was a 'client's chair' to the right of Mrs. Mac's desk, which wore a brown holland cover on these occasions. Some think that if they keep people standing they can the more readily get rid of them. This is wrong, and Mrs. Mac knew it. A petitioner on his legs never knows when his innings is over, unless, indeed, you order him out of the room, which is an extreme measure. Give him a chair, and when the time comes rise *yourself*, and he will understand that he is 'out.'

So Corporal Byngton was motioned into the 'client's chair,' and told pleasantly to give his name and state his business in as

few words as possible, because there were others waiting their turn. He got as far as 'Mr. Piper' and 'Excuse,' when she laid down her pen with an 'Oh dear! is it that? I'm very sorry, but it is promised already.'

'The man isn't buried yet, ma'am.'

'No matter; I am always prompt in these cases. It saves so much trouble and disappointment.'

'Then I'm too late?'

'I am afraid so.'

'I didn't think it would be decent for me to come after a man's place till the breath was out of his body.'

'Isn't that rather a reflection upon me, Mr. ' (consulting her notebook)—'Mr. Byngton?'

'Not so meant, ma'am, I do assure you. It's my fault, it seems, not coming sooner.'

Mrs. Mac liked to console the defeated. She smiled sweetly, and said :

‘ Perhaps I may be able to do something else when I know more about you. If you had come sooner for this affair, I am afraid it would have been all the same. I don’t think I ever saw you before—not even in church. You have no sort of claim upon me.’

‘ Depends upon what you call a “claim,”’ the corporal replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. ‘ When I came, I made sure that if you’d kindly listen to all I had to say, you might give me what I wanted.’

‘ Well, well !’ she said with impatience, and shutting up her notebook, ‘ go on ; but for goodness’ sake be brief.’

‘ I’ve been a soldier, ma’am, and know how to obey orders, so don’t be offended if I’m too sudden. I knew you and all your

family when you lived in Winchester Gardens, and I'm the man who found your bracelet the night before your marriage with Mr. Macgruther.'

'Indeed! I heard of that. You were honest enough to return it, and my father gave you half a sovereign. What else?'

'I used to be on duty from eight a.m. till ten p.m., when the night-watchman took my place.'

Being a cold day, there was a large fire burning. Perhaps the blaze was too bright for Mrs. Mac's eyes and complexion. She took up a large feather fan, opened it, and turned a little aside.

'They ought to have paid you well for such long hours. I suppose you were glad when ten o'clock came?' she said, patiently now.

'Glad to be relieved? Yes.'

‘Then please have some regard for my feelings, and relieve me.’

‘There was no night-watchman on the night before your wedding, Mrs. Macgruther.’

The sticks of her fan were snapped together smartly, and she drew a long breath.

‘Nevertheless,’ she replied, smiling, ‘nobody ran away with any of the houses, or stole my presents, and I got my lost bracelet back.’

‘Because I found it.’

‘You are very tiresome! Do you want more money for not being a thief?’

‘The night-watchman was sick,’ he went on, not noticing her taunt, ‘and I took his place.’

‘Dear me!’ she replied, leaning back, with the feather edge of the fan at

her eyes; 'how tired you must have been !'

'I was—dog-tired. I sat down on one of the seats and went fast asleep.'

'You might have been punished for that. I hope,' carelessly, 'that no one saw you.'

'No one saw me, ma'am; but I saw a young lady and a young gentleman.'

Mrs. Mac gave one of her musical laughs.

'Our under-housemaid and one of the shopmen from Elkart's—I know. I was abroad at the time, but have heard all about it. The woman borrowed my bracelet to show off. There was an inquiry. Well?'

'I have seen that girl and her sweetheart in the gardens after dark,' said the corporal, 'other nights. I ain't talking

about them now. Shall I tell you who the pair I *am* talking about were ?'

She rose with an angry flush, and faced him.

' This is black-mailing !' she exclaimed.

' Don't know what you mean by "black-mailing." I thought I'd done you a good turn by holding my tongue, and that when you knowed it you might pay it back by speaking up for me.'

' Then you really came for Piper's place ?'

' Just so. You see, ma'am, when you've got about enough to live on, an extra forty pounds a year makes a big difference.'

' Were you dismissed ?' she asked, resuming her seat.

' No, ma'am ; I resigned.'

' Of your own free will ?'

‘Yes, ma’am. My sister was alone, and wanted me.’

‘Are you sure you are telling me the truth?’

‘Certain sure. I’ve a certificate of good service and character.’

Mrs. Mac was disappointed.

‘Of course you’ve been talking about this rubbish?’ she observed, with a gesture of contempt.

‘Only to you, ma’am. I did *begin* to talk about old times in the gardens to Lord Wadehurst.’

‘To Lord Wadehurst?’ with a start.
‘When? Where?’

‘Last Friday, at our place. He came to ask sister if she could help him find poor Lady Gault.’

‘Never mind about that. What did you say about the—the gardens?’

‘ Reminded him of the lawn-tennis play with you ; but he was very short. He didn’t seem to like it.’

‘ Was that all ?’

‘ All about the gardens ; but I told him,’ looking her full in the face, ‘ that I didn’t believe what they say against him and poor dear Miss Fanny ; and I hope to God he will find her.’

‘ I also have had a conversation with Lord Wadehurst on the subject,’ said Mrs. Mac from behind her fan, which hid a face pale and twitching with emotion, ‘ and thought I had persuaded him that he would only waste his time.’

It was the corporal’s turn to be astonished.

‘ Excuse me, ma’am, but didn’t he say nothing about that night ?’

‘ You are a very tiresome man ! What night ?’

'The night you were—well, the night you lost that bracelet.'

'Corporal Byngton, I did not lose any bracelet. It was lost for me.'

'Well—I—am——'

He stopped just in time to smother the big, big D, but said enough to show Mrs. Mac where her advantage lay.

'Lord Wadehurst and I,' she said, 'cannot be friends, on account of the matter to which you have referred. We do not quite take the same view of it, and have agreed to differ. I am not surprised that he should have treated your talk about the gardens as an impertinence. I should, perhaps, have taken a similar tone. We will drop the subject' (rising). 'I did not recognise you at first, corporal. I now remember you as a very respectable and obliging man, and as you have such a

good character, I will see what can be done for you. Would something abroad—in the colonies—suit?’

‘My sister wouldn’t leave Hopshire, and I can’t leave her.’

‘How is your sister? Well, I hope. I only saw her once,’ said Mrs. Mac, ‘and was much struck by her manners and appearance—such a nice mixture of respect and dignity! Quite a model housekeeper for a place like this. I was so sorry I could not engage her. Tell her so, if you please, from me.’

This was intended for what common folks call ‘buttering up,’ and was done in Mrs. Mac’s best manner; but, unfortunately, the corporal knew what she had said about his sister when her application for re-engagement at the Manor House was made, and it was this:

'These old servants are desirable in some respects. They have feathered their nests, and do not pick and steal like new ones; but then they are sure to give themselves airs, and I hear that Goodlake is objectionable in that way.'

Her hearer was Colonel Daly, who repeated this dictum (as words of wisdom) to his wife in the presence of a servant, who took it down to the kitchen, whence it was passed on till it came home.

Mrs. Mac thought that the grin on Byngton's face was one of pleasure at this intended flattery, and proceeded:

'It is quite right of you not to leave her, and that is an additional reason why I should try to please you. When I said I had *promised* Piper's place, of course I only meant that I had promised my recommendation; and as it is usual to send

in several names, I shall add yours. You will hear from me in a day or two. And now I must really say good-bye.'

Then she rang the signal to 'call the next case,' and Byngton left the room bewildered.

Lord Wadehurst had not taken the bait, and Mrs. Mac had laughed at him. Had these two agreed together that the scene in the gardens should be kept secret? It looked very much that way; only what had Lord Wadehurst to gain by any such compact? Mrs. Mac was 'down on him,' had driven him out of the county. Why hadn't he told her to shut up, or he would expose her? No cock-and-bull story about the under-housemaid and her follower would go down with *him*. The honest old soldier was for hitting back when you're hit, and no refinements of *noblesse*

oblige came into his mind to account for Dick's strange forbearance.

‘Now,’ he thought, ‘if they be at one about this, I'd best keep quiet. Nobody would believe me against them both. She's a snake with a double tongue. Send in my name too, will she? That's all blarney, I reckon. If she does, there'll be a black cross put against it.’

* * * * *

His sister met him at the door with an anxious ‘Well, George, what did she say?’ and he told her briefly that he was to be recommended with others, and her face fell.

‘That's what they all say, just to give you hope and keep you dangling,’ she said.

‘She told me she was awfully sorry she couldn't have you for housekeeper.’

‘ And you believed her, after what we know ?’

The corporal grinned.

‘ That settles it,’ she continued. ‘ She’s a false woman, and you’ll no more get the place than I’ll be Queen of England.’

‘ What do they mean by black-mailing ?’ asked the corporal irrelevantly.

‘ Forcing people to pay money by threats to have things told against them.’

‘ Low down sort of business, eh ?’

‘ Yes, and punishable by law. Why do you ask ?’

‘ Because I want to know,’ he replied.

* * * * *

As soon as Mrs. Mac disposed of her last case, she sent off the following tele-

gram to a magnate whose name need not be mentioned :

‘Cancel my letter of yesterday. Will write to-night.’

And she wrote :

‘MY DEAR ———,

‘All I said about Mr. Kelly is correct, but he is a young man, and can wait. I have a better candidate, an old soldier with first-class testimonials. His name is George Byngton, and I shall feel *much* obliged if you will appoint him.

‘I hope you got my telegram.

‘Sincerely yours,

‘BERTHA MACGRUTHER.’

Then she laid down her pen, and thought :

‘Poor Dick!’ with a sigh; ‘he is acting

better than I deserve. Of course that man' (meaning Corporal Byngton) 'went to him with his story first, and got snubbed. You are the soul of honour, my poor Dick! and it is a shame—— Pshaw! self-preservation is the first law of nature. I *had* to do it. So he persists in his search for Fanny. Suppose he should find her! Suppose he should change his mind with Byngton and listen to his story! Great heavens! all would come out then. That abominable letter! Oh, why will men write—write to *anyone* about such things! I have made a mistake: I see it now. I should not have acted that lie to him' (Dick). 'I should have thrown myself upon his honour, and he would not have betrayed me. It was folly to persecute him as I did. And I should have told my husband something—

just enough to enable me to say, if the worst should come, “Well, I made no secret of it.” Is it too late now? How if I throw out a hint or two that there might be a mistake about Fanny? Or if I made a clean breast of it to my husband, and said, “I was a weak, romantic girl. I did promise to run away with Dick Birkett, but I repented. Your wife of six years, the mother of your children, has not a fibre in her body or a thought in her mind belonging to that silly girl!” Oh! that might have been; but now—my God!—he would say, “No, you have nothing in common with that girl, for *she* was honest! You are false to your sister, false to the man who loved you! You have hounded him from his home, knowing he was guiltless! You have helped to brand your own flesh and blood as an adulteress!

You have obtained position and influence as an upholder of truth, and you are a living lie!" And it would be true. I can see his cold eyes, hear his measured voice. He would have no pity. *He is so just.* No, I cannot go back. I must live in dread day after day.'





CHAPTER X.

THE CORPORAL SCORES.

FAIRLOCK MANOR HOUSE was full of guests for the pheasant-shooting, and so Mrs. Mac's duties as a hostess helped to distract the anxieties of the next day or two. What if her telegram had not arrived in time, and Kelly's appointment were already made out? What if by some untoward chance Byngton should not get the place? Then the black-mailing would begin in earnest. Nothing could be made out of her recommendation of an old soldier, maimed in the service of his country, for

a forty-pound-a-year post in the place where he lived ; but if she gave him money to hold his tongue she would be for ever in his power. Would he be content with the pittance he sought ? Might he not go on, doling out his fatal knowledge of her past bit by bit, and wringing concessions for every concealment in turn ? He had seen her and Dick that night in the gardens. He had probably hidden himself and overheard what was said. He would have waited and watched, and witnessed the throwing out of the key and the missive attached to it. If she defied or failed him, he might go with his story to Sir Horace Gault, or to her father, or—horror of horrors !—to her husband.

Some of this self-torture was relieved when there came a very gallant letter from the — Office, informing her that her

wishes were law, that Corporal Byngton's appointment was in course of preparation, and would be forwarded under cover to her, as she might like to present it to her protégé with her own 'fair hands.'

One of her guests was a gentleman who had filled several important diplomatic posts, and whose services to his country—if measured by the amount of his expenditure on telegrams—were enormous. He had a valet who followed him about with a fur coat, he took pills at dinner, and was much exercised on the subject of the lake.

'If I were you, dear Mrs. Mac,' he said, 'I would drain that horrid pond. It cannot be wholesome so near the house. It gives me the ague to look at it.'

'How dare you call our beautiful lake "a horrid pond"!' she replied saucily. 'Don't you know it is running water?'

‘It should run a great deal faster than it does, if I were you. It should run till there was not a pint left,’ grumbled the diplomatist. ‘I had a twinge of rheumatism last night. I always have when I sleep next door to an eel.’

‘We could not drain it if we wished to do so,’ Mr. Macgruther interposed. ‘There are clauses in our lease binding us to keep it exactly as it is. There has been some very costly litigation about that water, Sir James; but now, with safety culverts and automatic sluices, it has been regulated so that the farmers above us and the millers below have nothing left to complain about. Have you seen the dam? The works are ingenious. I will show them to you.’

‘Thanks very much,’ shivered Sir James; ‘I have given up dabbling in ponds.’

‘I have seen them,’ observed an Indian civilian. ‘We have similar arrangements in Bombay, and they work well; but we don’t plant trees in them.’

‘I thought the roots gave solidity to the embankment’ (this from Mr. Macgruther).

‘They do. But if the tree gets blown down in a hurricane and the roots are torn up, where are you? Shrubs or grasses, which yield to atmospheric pressure, are good; but there is danger in a big tree, such as has been left on your dam.’

‘Fortunately we have no hurricanes here,’ said Mrs. Mac. ‘We will change your room, dear Sir James, and place you further from that rheumatic eel; or we will have him caught and stewed for dinner.’

‘Pray spare him. It would be murder.’

‘What! to kill an eel?’

‘No, my dear lady—to make your guests eat him, stewed.’

‘Now, you good people,’ said Mrs. Mac afterwards, addressing the ladies and non-shooters, ‘must take care of yourselves till luncheon, for I have to pay a duty visit to a dear old couple for whom I have some good news.’

‘Ugh!’ shuddered Sir James. ‘I don’t envy you your drive in this bitter wind.’

‘So sorry! I thought of asking you to come with me. You would make the time pass *so* quickly.’

‘Charming woman!’ he said, when, wrapped in blue fox, she sailed away to her carriage; ‘always has the right thing to say.’

‘Lucky woman, too,’ added a lady; ‘not a wish ungratified, not a care.’

Black Care sat behind her, and chilled her through her furs.

‘Pray keep your chair, Mrs. Goodlake; sit down, corporal,’ she said cheerily, as she swept into the cottage. ‘May I take off my wraps? Thank you so much! What a nice little place you have—so tidy and comfortable! but, of course, with *you* here, Mrs. Goodlake, that goes without saying. You are such a capital manager. Well, I have what I hope may be a pleasant surprise for you. A trifle from Whitehall.’

And with a gracious smile she handed the corporal a long blue official envelope, marked ‘On Her Majesty’s Service.’ He took it, turned it over, and examined the seal; turned it back again, and read the address, ‘Corporal Byngton, late 57th Regt.,’ and placed it unopened on the table.

‘You know what it contains?’ asked Mrs. Mac.

‘ I can guess,’ replied the corporal curtly.

‘ I am glad to have been able to please you ; and perhaps it may be gratifying to know that you have been selected in preference to several eligible candidates.’

‘ Little rough on them, though.’

‘ I like you for saying that. Now open the letter and read it to your sister. I’m sure she is burning to know its contents.’

‘ I feel deeply indebted to you, madam,’ Mrs. Goodlake began, but the corporal stopped her.

‘ Will you please go to your own room, Jane, for a bit,’ he said ; ‘ I want to talk to this lady alone.’

‘ It is coming,’ thought Mrs. Mac, and her heart’s blood seemed changed into water.

‘ You have to ask, first, Brother George,

whether this lady wishes to speak with you alone. I think you are taking a liberty.'

The ex-housekeeper's sense of propriety was aroused.

'You are quite right, Mrs. Goodlake,' said Mrs. Mac graciously; 'but we will excuse him. You have learned things that are not taught in the army. I am sure he did not mean any disrespect. Yes, corporal, I am willing; only really I cannot see why your sister——'

'Oh, I'll not intrude; I'll go,' bridling. 'I'm not in the habit of staying where I'm not wanted.'

And she left them with a toss of her handsome old head.

The corporal followed her into the passage, watched her go upstairs, and heard the door of her room close with a bang. Then he came back.

‘Mrs. Macgruther,’ he began, ‘I’ve found out what “black-mailing” means.’

Her breath came quickly. Her face had the expression of some wounded thing when the keeper’s hand is stretched out to take it.

‘I didn’t know what it was when you used the word the other day. I’m told it means making someone pay you money by threats to have things told about them. Is that right?’

‘I so understand it ; but——’

‘Wait a bit. This,’ laying his hand on the unopened letter, ‘isn’t money, but it’s money’s worth. Did you get it for me because you wanted to be kind, or because you were afraid?’

Mrs. Mac tried hard to smile.

‘What is that they say,’ she asked him, ‘about looking a gift-horse in the mouth?’

‘ I ain’t talking horses,’ replied the matter-of-fact corporal ; ‘ I’m asking a plain question.’

‘ I am not afraid of you. Is that a plain answer ?’

‘ Hum—m ! Now suppose I hadn’t said a word about that night in the gardens, would you have done this for me ?’

‘ Perhaps. I think I said that I remembered you as a respectable and obliging man, and you have not given me any reason to change my opinion.’

When he had both his arms, the corporal was a first-class man with the bayonet, but this sort of fencing bothered him. He went doggedly back to his point.

‘ You promised this post,’ touching the letter, ‘ to Amos Kelly. Well, he says so ; and he made so sure of it that he went to Poundbridge and asked Mr. Pendleton

how much he would charge to paint him a signboard with a gold crown on the top. You told me as how you'd promised it to someone else.'

'And you said you thought you could get it, after all—which you did. I sent in Kelly's name and yours. You were preferred—old soldiers generally are for these things.'

'Is that all about it?'

'So far as I am aware.'

'Then why did you jump up in a fluster and talk about black-mailing?'

'Did I?'

'Yes, you did; and if I'd known what it meant *then*, I'd have acted different. I ain't no black-mailer, Mrs. Macgruther. I asked you a favour because I'd done you a service by holding my tongue. I made no threats, or thought 'em. You know what

I saw that night. You can't gammon me about under-housemaids and that rascal from Elkart's. I saw *you* ; I saw Lord Wadehurst as is, Mr. Dick Birkett as was ; and I heard what you said. I couldn't help it without showing myself. I saw you go back to the house, and open your window, and throw something out in the street for him to pick up ; and I saw what he did when he read the paper by the gas-lamp. If this isn't God's truth, you'd never have said "black-mailing."

She moved her lips, but no words came.

'It seems,' he continued, 'that you and Lord Wadehurst have fixed up things between you ; but you can't either of you make a fool of me. I shall keep what I know to myself, unless——'

'What ?—tell me,' she gasped.

‘Unless he finds Lady Gault, and you stand out against her. *She* shan’t suffer.’

‘Oh, Corporal Byngton, is that all—all you mean?’

‘‘Tain’t in human nature,’ he went on, pursuing his train of thought, ‘for a man to go a’most raving mad over a woman at twelve o’clock one night, and run away with another the next afternoon. He says he didn’t; she’ll say he didn’t, poor lady! if she’s ever found; and I’ll swear he didn’t, *now*. I wish I’d a spoken out when I gave back that bracelet—I *do*. But how was I to know what would happen? I ain’t no scholar; I ain’t no lawyer.’

‘You are a good man,’ she murmured, ‘and I have misunderstood you. Pray forget that I ever used that word.’

‘That’s just where I stand,’ he continued. ‘If I’m wanted to tell the truth

for your sister's sake, I tell it, and I don't care a snap of my fingers who gets hurt. So now you can take that back.' And he handed her the letter.

'No, no,' she cried, shrinking from it; 'it is not mine. It is delivered to you, and is yours; you cannot refuse it. Oh, corporal, have I not said enough? They call me a proud woman, and yet I have begged your pardon. I beg it again. You deserve all I have done for you. I ask you to accept it without the slightest reservation or condition, and if my unhappy sister be found, *of course* I will do all in my power to clear her. I solemnly promise you that I will. Do you consider the false position in which you will place me if you refuse this appointment?'

'Tell you the truth, ma'am,' said the cautious old soldier, 'I'm not thinking of

you at all ; I'm thinking of myself. I want the place' (with a lingering look at the blue envelope), 'but I wouldn't like to have it thrown in my face some day, and be told I was bought, and went back on the lady as paid for me.'

'If my sister be found, Lord Wadehurst would tell his own story. There will be no necessity for you to speak at all.'

'That's so,' said the corporal thoughtfully.

'Then you do accept?'

'Will you say—sideways, like—when the old lady comes down again, that there ain't no conditions about it?'

'Wouldn't that be rather compromising?'

'Right again ! She's mighty sharp.'

'I will tell her that you got the position

on your own merits, and admit that personally I preferred Kelly.'

'Well, well!' he exclaimed; 'if that don't bang Banagher, I'm——'

But he stopped himself in time.

'The man is honest,' mused Mrs. Mac, as she was driven homeward; 'what must he think of me?' For she had kept her word, and told Mrs. Goodlake, 'sideways like,' how sorry she was for poor Mr. Kelly's disappointment. This, as you will readily perceive, served a double purpose: it satisfied the corporal, and furnished materials for a sop to Kelly.

As she crossed the bridge, perceiving quite a number of her guests on the embankment, she got out and joined them. The Indian civilian was giving them an object lesson on the escape works, which

none of them understood, but all declared to be ‘really *so* clever.’ Charmed to have another pupil, he harked back.

‘I was saying, my dear Mrs. Mac, that this part of the dam is evidently natural, being the spur of the hill which once sloped down to the stream. They made a semi-circular excavation for the water, and began their artificial dam just where my foot is, leaving the tree standing. That was a mistake.’

‘I think it is a beautiful tree,’ said Mrs. Mac.

‘I have nothing to say against it as a tree,’ replied the expert. ‘In these cases we have often to sacrifice the ornamental for the useful. If some extraordinary high flood should loosen its roots, and a storm blow it down, good-bye to your lake! Now, with regard to these valves——’

He was interrupted by the joyous clang of the luncheon bell, and the meeting dispersed.

Mrs. Mac was in brilliant form all that day. 'Not a wish ungratified, not a care.' It was known only in a sore corner of her own heart that she held all this splendour at the will of a one-armed pensioner, who knew her for a liar and a fraud.





CHAPTER XI.

FIFTY POUNDS REWARD.

‘ SHE shall go if she wants to,’ said Mark Applejohn ; ‘ and if she does, there shan’t be no gal at that ball better dressed than her—than she. I don’t want no cheap stuff for our Stella—no muslin and such-like. What do you say to a sky-blue velvet gownd ?’

Mother smiled.

‘ Velvet is not a good material to dance in,’ she said, suppressing the other objections.

‘ Ain’t it ? Well, then, something else,

rich and fine, that she can darncce in—bless her life ! I'd like to see her darncce all night long. She wants something to cheer her up, mother ; she's looking dull and down-hearted. You take her to town, and get one of them she-tailor men to rig you both up. Tell him I want all things AI, and no skimping. I won't skimp the cheque.'

Another conversation on the same subject (the infirmary ball) was held about the same time at Fairlock Rectory, where, unfortunately, the cheques had to be skimmed severely. All the Gault legacy, and more, had been sunk in the vortex of Willie Barbour's short but rapid career at Oxford ; and the Rector's available means did not run to a new dress for his second daughter, Ellen.

'She cannot go,' said Mrs. Barbour decisively. 'She has nothing to wear.'

‘Tut, tut!’ replied her husband; ‘girls can always manage to get up something.’

‘She has no something to get up. That old pink silk is not fit to be seen, and they will have electric lights.’

‘Couldn’t Stella lend her a dress?’

‘Stella hasn’t one for herself that I know of. The Applejohns were in mourning this time last year, and she did not go to the ball.’

‘They will give her one.’

‘Of course! and she’ll take it, and not think about her poor sister. It will be just like them to give her something expensive, so as to shame us. That’s one reason why I won’t let Ellen appear in that faded rag, for them to turn up their noses at.’

‘My love, Mr. Applejohn has been very kind. Think of what he did for William.’

‘Sent him off to Australia,’ whimpered Mrs. Barbour; ‘and we shall never see him again. Why couldn’t he have found him a place in London or somewhere. But of course *you’re* satisfied. You’ve got rid of him. I believe you’d like to send all the family after him if you could. You only think of yourself, and how you can best shirk your responsibilities.’

The Rector moaned. There was indeed one of his family whom he would gladly ship to the antipodes.

‘And there you sit,’ continued his wife, ‘doing nothing.’

‘My dear, what am I to do? You say that Ellen cannot go, and that ends it.’

‘It does *not* end it, Mr. Barbour. Young Smallpage is very attentive to her. I am almost sure that if he saw her nicely

dressed, and other men dancing with her, he would propose. You must do something.'

'If you will kindly suggest——'

'Oh yes, throw it on *me*!'

'But really, my love, what *can* I do? Hardcastle was very rude about his bill last Saturday, and would hardly let me have a pair of gloves on credit. Dear Stella's salary is paid in advance up to Christmas. I have no money, and you know how much I have borrowed.'

'Go to Mrs. Macgruther and borrow some more. She ought to be liberal, considering the dirty work you have done for her.'

The Rector clasped his hands meekly and appealed to the ceiling.

'It's no use your turning up the whites of your eyes at *me*,' said his better half.

‘ I know you helped her to drive Dick Birkett out of his home.’

‘ The destroyer of her unhappy sister,’ he began magisterially, but she stopped him.

‘ Pshaw ! What does she care about her sister ? She has some spite of her own against him. Men like Dick Birkett may snap their fingers at the seventh commandment, but they won’t sneak out of the consequences. They’d break all the rest, and lie, and steal, and kill before they’d do what you’ve told of him.’

‘ My love, I merely repeated what Mrs. Macgruther assured me was the fact.’

‘ And so lost any chance you might have of getting Langley, with its six hundred a year. Have you ever reminded her of that ?’

‘ No.’

‘ Of course not ! Well, do so at once.

Mention old Mr. Stacey's bad health, and how often you have to do duty for him, and borrow fifty pounds.'

'Fifty pounds! I——'

'Don't be a fool, Barbour! Do as I tell you.'

I will some day write a treatise on the immorality of virtuous indignation, giving you a *catalogue raisonné* of people who have been hanged (so to speak) in haste and acquitted at leisure; and of things we hold up for admiration, after having covered them with ridicule. At present I will stick to the case of Dick Birkett; and if you reflect a little, you will conclude that when Mrs. Barbour is found in the ranks of the doubters, their number must be legion. It is true that she deems him capable of perjury, robbery, and murder; but he is not accused on any such common-

place charges. The grievance against him is that, having run away with another man's wife, he did not make an honest woman of her when he could do so, and deserted her to suit his own convenience. Virtuous indignation came out like Judge Lynch, swallowed the accusation raw, executed the culprit, went home and said its prayers ; and when asked next morning (so to speak) for an explanation, looked foolish, and began, as usual, to shunt the blame.

It all came back to Mr. Barbour. How did he know ? Mrs. Macgruther had told him. *How did she know ?* Where was her sister ? When did she find out that she was in want, and what had she done, and what was she doing, to alleviate it ? These were questions which Mr. Barbour could not answer ; and Dick

had not been gone a week before they became unpleasantly current.

The worst blow of all was given by the new curate (now Dick's staunch friend), who in the Rector's absence (doing old Mr. Stacey's duty at Langley) preached on the text 'Judge not, lest ye be judged,' and, without mentioning a name or a circumstance, gave his congregation to understand that the major part of them had not only acted in an unchristian manner, but had made fools of themselves.

This was gall to Mrs. Mac; but she swallowed it with a smile, and agreed with the guests who attended church with her that it was really a very good sermon. Mrs. Barbour chuckled inwardly, and said nothing.

The next morning the Rector called at the Manor House on the mission we know of, and found Mrs. Mac in what was really

a very bad humour, veneered with polished smiles.

By no means destitute of tact when out of the orbit of his wife, he touched lightly on his domestic difficulties, and then, alluding to the questions which were flying, asked to be supplied with ammunition to bring them down.

‘For really,’ he observed, ‘it is very awkward to be asked these things and have no reply ready.’

‘In your place, dear Mr. Barbour,’ she told him, ‘my reply would invariably be, “Mind your own business.”’

‘But you see I am in some measure responsible for the truth of the—er—statement.’

‘Do you doubt it?’

‘Oh no—dear me! When you vouch for all the facts?’

‘But I don’t vouch for all the facts,’ she replied, leaning back and fanning herself.

‘Good heavens!’ cried the Rector, aghast. ‘You told me——’

‘What I was told. Be good enough to remind these inquisitive and, I must add, impertinent persons, that I have a father and mother and two grown-up brothers living; and that, being a married woman, I do not interfere in matters which concern the family I have left. How can people be so silly as to imagine that it is any business of mine to provide for my sister?’

‘Ah! then I may say——’

‘Say as little as possible. Refer them to me, or to Lord Strathfolia—my father. Of course, he will be delighted to share our family secrets with the scandal-mongers of Fairlock. It is enough to

make one disgusted with country life,' she continued with scorn, 'when, after doing all I have done for the neighbourhood, I am treated in this vulgar way.'

He condoled with her, and preached a little about virtue having to be its own reward. He narrated instances of ingratitude to himself and rudeness—Hardcastle's rudeness—and so brought the conversation round cautiously to his own distress, and pleaded for a loan of fifty pounds.

She asked herself, 'Is this black-mailing?' But remembering her slip with Corporal Byngton, she kept the angry word down.

Knowing well all the signs and tokens which herald the dawn and attend the rising of such requests, she let him run on, quietly deliberating within herself, 'How much may I gain by giving him this

money? How much harm could he do me if I refuse it ?

Such a sum, he continued, would satisfy several small but clamorous creditors, and she (Mrs. Mac) was his only resource, as *now* it was clear that he could not hope for any preferment in the gift of Lord Wadehurst.

‘ I really do not know,’ she told him, after waiting mercilessly till he had run down, ‘ if I can oblige you. You know how many calls there are on my purse, and I make it a rule never to exceed my allowance. However, I will see, and let you know this evening.’

When he was gone her anger broke out, chiefly against her own folly. Why hadn’t she left well alone ? Her position was like that of some greenhorn hunter, who, having wounded a wild beast mortally,

went up and kicked it, getting an ugly scratch for his pains. She had told Mr. Barbour circumstantially and out of her own knowledge that Dick had refused to render Lady Gault the only reparation in his power, and had left her helpless in Mexico when the news that he had come in for the title reached him. The Rector's consternation when told that she vouched for nothing showed that he remembered this. Here was another who knew her for a liar, or could easily convict her of falsehood. What if she were taken at her word, and Lord Strathfolia appealed to for particulars! Oh, why had she not left Dick's reputation to linger on and die (as it might have done) under her first shot!

So mused this wretched woman amidst her splendid surroundings, and in the full

glare of the flattery and homage bestowed upon her.

Mr. Barbour returned to the Rectory, wishing that he had asked for twenty pounds instead of fifty, and found his family rejoicing. For the cause we must go back to Wood End, where Stella is sitting on the arm of Mark Applejohn's chair, with her fair cheek against his nobby forehead, as is her wont in a coaxing match.

'So,' she cooed, 'I'm to go to the ball like the Queen of Sheba and Cleopatra and Cinderella all rolled into one vision of beauty and fashion? You are the very dearest of old dears! But I am going like a country clergyman's daughter, who has kind friends to give her two pretty dresses suitable to her age and her position.'

Then she told him that poor dear Nellie had nothing to wear ; that poor dear Nellie had a sweetheart, and burned to go to the ball ; and that if he (dearest of old dears) would only give her (Stella) half what he intended, and let her share it with Nellie, she (the coxer) would be the happiest girl in all Hopshire.

So, understanding this pair (as I hope you do), you know why there was rejoicing at the Rectory.

‘ It is most unfortunate that I could not know this before,’ Mr. Barbour observed to his wife. ‘ I hope you regret having so misjudged our dear Stella.’

‘ She might have told us sooner,’ was the ungracious reply. ‘ She doesn’t do half as much as she might.’

‘ My love, Mr. Applejohn has not adopted the whole family ! This is really

very generous of him. I hope I may be allowed to take it as an omen of success in that other matter.'

'If the woman meant to refuse you, she would have said so right out. The more she thinks about it, the surer we are,' was the verdict of this astute person; and she was right.

We know what Mrs. Mac thought, and her conclusion was that Barbour's silence and continued support was cheap at fifty pounds.

She drew a cheque, changed it at the Poundbridge Bank, drove on to Fairlock, and pressed the notes into the Rector's hand with the sweetest smile.

'So glad,' she whispered, 'to be able; but don't tell anyone.'

Then she sat down, and filled the shabby room with her gracious presence, the per-

fume of her rich clothing, and the music of her voice. She gathered the children round her, and delighted them with funny stories of her own boys. She half thawed grim Mrs. Barbour, so pleasant and unaffected was her talk, so kind her interest in that lady's troubles with the servants. Now for the first time she met Stella, and appraised her up and down. As Mr. Barbour escorted her back to her carriage, at the conclusion of this pleasing visit, she asked :

‘ Is that the poor girl you have lent to those Australians ?’

‘ My eldest daughter—yes ; and she is quite happy with them.’

‘ In—deed ! that is fortunate. I hope it will last, for one can never rely on people of that class. Will she go with them to the ball ?’

‘ I believe so.’

‘ I rather enjoy these mixed affairs,’ said Mrs. Mac ; ‘ one finds so many curious characters. You may introduce these—what do you call them—Applesticks ?’

‘ Applejohns.’

‘ Dear me, what a name ! Well, you may present them, and I will leave a card afterwards for your daughter’s sake. *Good-bye*, dear Mr. Barbour.’

‘ Charming woman !’ mused the Rector, as he returned. ‘ So generous, so thoughtful ! I must really speak seriously to my wife about her unfounded prejudice.’

But Mrs. Barbour had the first word.

‘ You ought to be ashamed of yourself !’ she began. ‘ You stared at that woman all the time she was here as though you wanted to eat her up. I believe you’re in love with her !’

‘ Oh, how can you——’

‘ And she encourages you. I saw her squeeze your hand through the carriage-window, and you dare not deny it. *I'm* no fool, Barbour!’

After this, how could the poor man ‘ speak seriously ’ in favour of Mrs. Mac ?

Now, there had been some parting pressure, but it came from the other side, and much amused Mrs. Mac.

‘ The old idiot !’ she said to herself, with a smile, ‘ I have settled him. I wonder’ (here the smile faded out) ‘ who will be the next to blackmail me for my wretched blunder ?’

She led her house party to the ball like a queen, the loveliest woman there, the most courted, most envied. She danced, she laughed, she had the right thing to say for everyone. She wove pleasant smiles

and gracious words into a cast-net, which she threw with a big sweep all round her, and great was the catch. Seldom had she been in finer form. It was known only in that sore corner of her own heart that she held all this splendour at the will and pleasure of *two*, who knew her for a liar and a fraud.

Stella and her sister appeared in dresses exactly alike, and very 'fetching.' Nellie Barbour, smart and complete for the first time in her life, looked radiant. It is a great thing for a girl to know she is all right, from the pins in her hair downwards. This made her confident and a little saucy, won her many partners, and called the green-eyed monster into the breast of young Mr. Smallpage, who hardened his faint heart and won his fair lady before the night was out.



CHAPTER XII.

FIND LADY GAULT.

THE good behaviour of Dick's silver-mines caused several changes in his arrangements. The family plate remained where it was ; King Pippin did not go to the hammer, but stood at livery with Job Pedley, at the orders of the Rev. Percy Stanring, who was requested, as a favour, to use him as though he were his own. Dick was now in a position to hire aid for his quest, and, with Sam Crawford's assistance, found Mr. Biggs, the detective, who

had hunted him aforetime in the service of the late Lord Wadehurst.

Mr. Biggs considered himself a much ill-used man. Lord Wadehurst had not only snubbed his former employers, Messrs. Spiers and Co., but severely taxed their bill. Even detective agencies are human in some respects, and this one had passed on the snub with interest to their dependent, and cut down *his* little account by way of consolation. Biggs did not like this, so he left them, and set up on his own account, but was not prospering when Dick sent for him.

‘ I could have almost sworn, my lord,’ he said, ‘ that you’d been robbed and kidnapped ; and, by good rights, you *ought* to have been, for all the indications pointed that way. The old lord thought that it was a case of murder by Sir Claude or

Spaulding, or both together ; but that was foolishness. And when I asked him straight out if there was a woman in it, he said " No." And then he blamed me, and got into a row with Spiers because we didn't follow up Lady Gault. That wasn't fair. Our orders were to find *you*, for that poor young gentleman's sake. Now, if you want a detective to be of any good, you've got to tell him all you know—don't you see ?—just as you'd do with a lawyer or a doctor.'

Dick did not accept this invitation to unbosom himself. He merely gave Mr. Biggs his instructions, which were, to find Patrick Halsey (late butler at Fairlock Manor House), and ascertain if Lady Gault had any foreign correspondence, and to do all that could be done, after so long a lapse of time, to trace the lady with the

dark-green dressing-bag who left the Métropole Hotel on November 19 six years ago. He was also to find one Henry Grainger, who about that time was serving as surgeon on board the steamship *Caledonian*, of Liverpool.

Then he published some cautiously-worded advertisements in the 'agony' columns of various newspapers at home and abroad, calling upon 'Fan' to communicate with 'Dick,' and giving an address.

Halsey was easily found, and parted freely. Yes, his late mistress did receive letters with foreign stamps upon them; and she wrote frequently to a Mdlle. Blanche Leroux, at Dieppe. This lady, he understood, used to teach Lady Gault French before she was married, and they were much attached to each other. Mdlle.

Leroux had paid two or three visits to her old pupil at the Manor House ; but there had been an unpleasantness between her and Sir Claude (which need not be stated) on the last occasion, and this led to her abrupt departure. There was no quarrel between her and Lady Gault, and they corresponded afterwards.

This seemed promising, but (as might have been expected) no trace could be found of the lady with the dark-green dressing-bag. The 'other man,' who had shadowed Mr. Biggs, and been by him shadowed, was dead ; and Messrs. Lucas and Lucas declined to give any information whatever on this part of the subject. All they would divulge was that Sir Claude had instructed them before Mr. Barbour's visit with the compromising letter to Frank.

With the assistance of our Vice-Consul at Dieppe, Dick obtained an introduction to Mdle. Leroux, who was following her old *métier* in a *pension* for young ladies. She shrank from him in horror. *Any* man was an object of suspicion and dread in this sequestered grove, dedicated to Diana and the instruction of French innocence, but such a man as Dick! Poor Blanche Leroux had heard of her former pupil's fall, and received him much as a responsible pigeon might receive the visit of a travelling vulture at her dovecote. But even a French teacher, brought up to entertain leisurely the opinion expressed by David in his haste as to the truthlessness of man, had to yield at last to his earnest and sorrowful pleading. She told him that Lady Gault wished her to remain permanently at the Manor House as com-

panion, but that Sir Claude's conduct broke up this arrangement. That afterwards they corresponded in even warmer terms than before; that in several letters she alluded to the miserable life she led, and that in one (the last of all) she wrote : ' I cannot endure it. My parents will not receive me—I must do something for myself. Tell me, dearest, frankly, am I too stupid to be a governess? I know I would be kind to little children, but could I teach them ?'

This was dated November 8, and we know what happened on the 19th.

' I pitied her from the bottom of my heart,' said Blanche Leroux; ' but what would you? Kind to little children! She was kind to all the world—too kind, too generous, too yielding. Hence all her sorrows. I was obliged to answer gravely.

“Quit not your home,” I wrote. “It is our lot to suffer. Pray that the good God may soften your husband’s heart, and do nothing rash. You are not fit—I say it in all love and frankness—to brave this world alone.” Was I not right ?

‘Right and true,’ was Dick’s reply.

‘But see now !’ said Blanche, clasping her hands, ‘she thought me unkind ; she made no answer. She did not come here—here, where I had a home for her ; here, where I would have defended her.’ The bright little woman’s black eyes flashed through her tears. ‘It is sad, my lord, so sad !’

‘Can you suggest anyone else with whom she might have sought protection ?’

‘She had no friends—the poor child ! Those of her girlhood who visited her were insulted, as I was, and some of them

blamed her for it. They all fell off, one by one, as I know. She had no one to turn to but me, and I scolded! What has become of her? It is terrible to think—so young, so pretty!’

‘I have heard of women, mademoiselle, as delicately nurtured, and, if you will, as weak as poor Lady Gault was when we knew her, who, thrown on their own resources, have led brave lives. *Noblesse oblige*. When I find her—oh yes, I shall—I will bring her first to you.’

‘Oh, how you are good! And I—will you forgive me for that at first I——’

‘Never mind. It was only natural,’ said Dick, with a sad smile. ‘I am accustomed to that now. Thank you for believing me.’

‘I believe in you *both*,’ she said, giving him her hand. ‘May the good God aid you!’

So his journey to Dieppe, and the hopes with which it was freighted, came to naught? Not quite. He had a small adventure going back to his hotel which opened up some serious considerations.

He came upon two little girls, who were crying bitterly, and a lubberly French boy laughing at them. On the ground was an empty bag, and in the garden of a house close by (the iron gates of which were locked) sported a lady rabbit and her family of three little ones. He was informed, through much sobbing, by the elder of the children, that they had been given these rabbits for pets, and mamma had lent them an old bag to bring them home; that the boy was hired to carry it; that being closed on delivery to him, and feeling kicking inside, his curiosity got the better of him, and he opened it; that he

would take out one of the little ones, and the mother had hopped forth whilst they were trying to get it away from him, and that eventually all four had run in between the bars of the gate, and they were eating the flowers, and someone would kill them.

Dick sent the lubberly boy off blubbering from a well-applied box on the ear, rang the bell, and obtained permission to enter and retrieve. He, knowing all about pet rabbits, caught the smallest of the babies, and held it on the ground till its mother lumbered up to see what was the matter. Then he grabbed her, and the rest was easy.

As he restored them all to their travelling compartment, something made him notice it, being a strange receptacle for rabbits, as he thought. It was an old dressing-bag, metal-mounted, flat-bot-

tomed, and wide-mouthed, and bearing evidences of departed splendour — of a make, too, which suggested Pall Mall or Bond Street ; for although what had once been gilt clasps were broken and tarnished, the structure was intact, and the leather soft but strong. The interior fittings had been removed ; the outside was grimy and plastered with numerous railway-labels. He wetted his finger and rubbed away some of the grime. The original colour had been dark-green, and on one flap of an outside pocket he could trace a monogram which looked like F. G., or G. F., but the G was bigger than the F. Dick's mind was full of Fanny Lady Gault, and here was a lady's dressing-bag, dark-green with (once) gilt clasps, and a monogram corresponding to her initials on it !

‘Will you tell me your name, dear?’ he said in French to the elder child, when the recovered pets were safely stowed.

‘Mary—and what’s yours, you dear, kind man?’ she replied in plain English.

‘I am Mr. Catch Rabbit,’ he laughed, thinking how his French had betrayed him.

‘That’s not a real name,’ she replied gravely. ‘You might be Mr. Wabbit, for I know a man who is Mr. Hog, but you can’t be Mr. *Catch* Wabbits. There’s no such name as “Catch.” Mr. Hog’s name is Peter.’ This with the decision of five years’ experience.

Dick dissembled.

‘And your sister—what is her name?’ he asked.

‘Agnez,’ lisped the younger, ‘and half the wabbits is mine. I like *you*.’

‘So your mamma lent you this bag. Is it hers?’

‘Why, of course! It used to have such pretty things in it, but they’re all broken.’

‘Now,’ said their inquisitor, ‘I’m going to guess mamma’s name.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Yes I can. It begins with a G.’

Both children laughed and pointed fingers at him.

‘You’re a great stupid!’ the elder said. ‘How can it begin with a G when it’s Mary, like mine?’

‘Oh, but I mean her other name—your papa’s name as well.’

The children danced with glee now, as childhood will when it finds grown-up people out in a blunder. This grown-up man was capital at catching rabbits, but an utter failure as a guesser.

‘ Why, it’s Paulding !’ they cried.
‘ Paulding don’t begin with a G. You don’t know your letters yet. It begins with an S.’

‘ How can Paulding begin with an S ?’

‘ I didn’t thay Paulding — I thayed P—aulding,’ insisted little Mary.

‘ So did I—Paulding.’

‘ But you must thay P—aulding.’

‘ I think I understand,’ said Dick ;
‘ there’s an S in it which your little tongue cannot get out. Tell me how you spell it, please.’

‘ S-p-a-u-l-d-i-n-g.’

‘ Well, I ought to have said it *ended* with a G, and that’s right.’

‘ Oh, but you thayed it *began* with a G —didn’t he, Ag ?’

‘ Yes, ’oo did,’ Agnes replied severely—
‘ ’oo—’oo did. ’Oo’s a vezzy funny man.’

By this time their *bonne* (who ought to have been in attendance throughout, but had stopped to gossip with a *sergent de ville*) came up out of breath, and much to her disgust had to carry the bag.

‘Take your pets home,’ Dick said, ‘and don’t let them out for anyone.’

So with kisses—for all the children held up their innocent lips to Dick—they parted.

In answer to inquiry at his hotel, he was told that Madame Spaul-deen was well known—a rich lady, English, who lived in a villa, much distinguished, with her father M. Martin. Her husband (much absent) was grand amateur of race horses, owner of the renowned Toreador, who won the Grand Prix of Paris ; it is three years ago.

Dick was puzzled. This Mary Spaulding

was evidently the late Mary Martin, and it was in the nature of things that in her intermediate stage as the second Lady Gault she should inherit many things which had belonged to Sir Claude's first wife. Was it possible that Fanny Lady Gault had *two* dark-green dressing-bags with gilt clasps, and that she had left one of them behind? Such a bag is an obvious present for a bride. She might have been given half a dozen such, and (with her initials engraved on the brushes and bottles and things) have been unable to swop some of them off, as I understand may be done with multiplate wedding-gifts. Dick thought it curious that the first thing found in connection with Fanny should correspond with the last thing seen in her possession, and theorized thus :

‘ Can it be that Martin was privy to her

lady's flight, and assisted her, and for this reason was discharged? She might have joined her mistress in London, and then relieved her of the compromising bag. Sir Claude (acting under advice) would naturally make it up with so important a witness, and provide for her pending the divorce proceedings. But their marriage! How was that to be accounted for? Had Mary Martin been playing a double game, pretending to be faithful to her mistress whilst working a deep-laid plot in her master's interest? If so, why discharge her?

It was like one of those Chinese puzzles in zigzag pieces of ivory. You get the top right, but the bottom won't fit. The middle comes together beautifully, but the outside is distracting.

Dick returned to the *pension* and told

Mdlle. Leroux. According to the best of her recollection, Lady Gault had only one dressing-bag such as he described. The others were small affairs that would not hold a full-grown rabbit.





CHAPTER XIII.

ROBBED AND MURDERED.

FORTIFIED with a letter from the Foreign Office, in which her Majesty's diplomatic and consular officers were requested to give Lord Wadehurst every assistance in their power (without incurring any expenditure on the public account) with regard to certain inquiries of a private character in which he was engaged, Dick started on his quest for Lady Gault. Knowing that French was the only foreign language at her command, he tried France, Belgium, and such parts of Switzerland

as would be likely to afford her an asylum ; judging that she would try to support herself by her painting, he drew the principal art-centres. Fearing that this might fail, he made 'casts' around consulates and St. George's societies, and all the associations for the relief of distressed British subjects abroad that came within his reach. He worked systematically and with unwearied patience, rewarded by some glimmerings of hope and many absurd disappointments. For example, having carefully described Fanny as a young, pretty and fragile woman of twenty-one, he was sent all the way from Nantes to the island of Guernsey after a stout person of middle age, whom he found in a good situation as cook. In the course of six weeks he had accumulated a coachful of seven - by - nine pictures of

hedgerows with birds' nests and wild-flowers and butterflies, more or less true to Nature—usually less. He found them in the *petits salons*, in dealers' windows, or sale rooms, or *maisons de piété*; sought out the artists or owners, and had not the heart to quench the expectations he raised.

No answer appeared to any of his advertisements. As a last resource (which he hated) he obtained the assistance of the secret police, and after following many a false scent, was put upon one which seemed high and true.

It took him to her Majesty's consulate at Havre, where he was told that on December 21, 1880 (*i.e.*, about a month after the disappearance of Lady Gault), a young Englishwoman was found in one of the worst quarters of the city under very

distressing circumstances. She was fair, very good-looking, and well but plainly dressed. She had been beaten and robbed, and left insensible in the street. Although treated with the utmost care, she never recovered sufficiently to give the least account of herself; and here is the note taken by the Consul when he visited her at the hospital, as extended in his diary :

‘December 21.—Case of woman unknown, discovered by the police 5.20 (morning) in Rue Blanc, near wine-shop of Pierre Deschamps (bad character—arrested). Young, about twenty, fair, pretty, hands delicate, marks of rings on her fingers; no jewellery found; dress plain, good material, much torn; under-clothing marked F. G.; bad wound on right temple. Delirious for five hours since discovery; cries for her money; moans, “I won’t go!” in English, and

“Where are you taking me?” Mentions several names that I cannot make out, and some that are clear—these are: *Claude Fairlock, Martin, Goodlake.*

‘8 p.m.—Patient still unconscious, but silent and sinking fast.

‘December 22, 4 a.m.—Patient dead.’

The report of the police, after stating the particulars already recorded, ran thus :

‘It is ascertained that she arrived at this port on the morning of December 20, from Paris, accompanied by an elderly man, dressed in a soft striped gray and blue cap and English-made ulster to match. They descended at the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs and took breakfast. The man then went to the office of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique, and spoke about engaging a passage for a young lady to New York. He was told

that there was always plenty of room at that time of the year, and that the passenger might take her ticket in the morning as she passed the office to embark. It was also arranged that a clerk who spoke English should call for her at the hotel with a carriage. The man returned to the hotel, and almost immediately took the train back to Paris. No suspicion attaches to him. At three o'clock the young woman went out alone and posted a letter, having purchased a 25-centime stamp at the *débit de tabac* of Jules Lambert. Considering that the letter-box was cleared and the mail despatched long before the police were informed of the crime, this letter cannot be traced. The young woman then entered the establishment of Felix Frères, purchased several articles of perfumery, and changed a note of one

hundred francs. She wore several rings, some silver bangle bracelets, and a gold watch ; but these were not noticed sufficiently to enable us to describe them. Having left MM. Felix's, she strolled towards the port with no apparent object, and was last seen in company of a woman unknown at present. She spoke only English at the hotel or at MM. Felix's. She was not seen again till found insensible, as already stated. Nothing has been discovered in the wine-shop of the man Deschamps. Inquiry proceeding.

‘December 23.—Baggage of deceased Englishwoman deposited at the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs, examined under official sanction, contains’ (here followed a list of clothing, etc., with the observation that all the wearing apparel was new, and marked with the letters ‘F. G.’).

‘ No jewellery or valuables. No papers, except a bill of exchange on Messrs. Brown Brothers, of New York, for two thousand five hundred dollars, drawn to the order of bearer. London police notified.’

‘ I reported the case home,’ the Consul told Dick, after showing the above, ‘ and endeavours were made to identify the deceased. As I am instructed to give you every information in my power, I may perhaps tell you in strict confidence that for some time our Criminal Investigation Department thought it had a clue. They ascertained that a private inquiry had been recently set on foot for a lady who had disappeared, and whose initials were “ F. G.,” but subsequent disclosures accounted for her.’

‘ May I ask how ?’

‘ Well,’ said the Consul, with a smile,

‘it seems that she eloped with a man whom she preferred to her husband. There was a suit afterwards for divorce, which went against her.’

Dick had hard work to control himself.

‘You refer, I think,’ he said, with suppressed emotion, ‘to the case of *Gault* versus *Gault and Birkett*?’

‘I did not mean to mention names,’ the Consul replied; ‘but, as you seem to know all about it, I can say yes.’

‘Were the disclosures made in that case the only reason why our police abandoned their attempt to identify the woman who was murdered here?’

‘They didn’t abandon it. We merely gave up what was proved to be a wrong clue.’

‘You were easily satisfied!’ Dick ex-

claimed in mingled scorn and indignation.

This nettled her Majesty's Consul.

'Allow me to inform you, Lord Wadehurst,' he replied stiffly, 'that Lady Gault was seen alive in Mexico more than a year after the murdered woman was buried here.'

It did not suit Dick's present tactics to contest this statement, so he let it pass. He felt that he had already gone too far in mentioning the Gault case, when his inquiry was (ostensibly) confined to the personality of another. The Consul, mistaking the cause of his silence, went on :

'I assure you that no stone was left unturned to detect the assassins of this poor girl. I myself did all that was possible.'

'But she remains unidentified?'

‘No one claimed her; and you know there was a considerable amount of money in her possession. We supposed that one of the persons she appealed to in her delirium—Claude Fairlock—might be her lover whom she was to join in New York; and search was made for him there, but all in vain.’

‘Did you state in your report that she had appealed to a man named Claude Fairlock?’

‘Certainly. She called him “dear Claude” frequently, and held out her arms as though to seek his protection.’

‘And Martin? How did she mention that name?’

‘With fear, and sometimes reproach.’

‘Was any endeavour made to trace the man in the striped ulster?’

‘Oh! he was in Paris hours before the

robbery. There was nothing against him.'

'But he must have known all about her. Could you form any opinion as to what had been her class in life?'

'I formed several theories, and so did my wife. I have told you about her hands. They were rather large, but soft and white. She had never done rough work. Two of the dresses found in her luggage were such as any gentlewoman could wear. One of them was very handsome; but my wife remarked the absence of those little fads and odds and ends which ladies collect and carry about with them. Everything was so new as to suggest a *start*—in other words, a new departure in life; and there was nothing to show what condition she had left. Now, don't you see that even a bride, who generally starts with a

bran-new outfit of everything, will cling to some pet *chiffon*—some half-worn ribbons, or gloves, or laces, and take them with her? This poor creature had nothing to indicate her past. Then, according to the medical evidence (which you shall see presently), taken for obvious reasons, it appears that she ought to have been a married woman; but she had no wedding-ring. Now you have all the facts, and can judge for yourself.'

Dick's judgment formed itself clear and strong. The dead woman of the Rue Blanc was Lady Gault.

The identity of initials was a small matter upon which, taken alone, he did not rely. Frances might have taken another name for her flight; and it was rather against the probabilities that she should have chosen one beginning with a G. But all

the rest appeared to him 'confirmation strong as Holy Writ.' The physical description answered; the time answered; she spoke in her delirium of 'Claude,' of 'Fairlock,' of 'Martin,' and of 'Goodlake'—names of people, and of a place, which would naturally come into her shattered brain. He knew that under similar circumstances the victim's memory of recent events often fails, and this would account for her instinctive appeal to her husband for protection, and calling him '*dear* Claude.' Even if she had remembered all, she might have cried to him for help against the coarser ruffians in whose power she supposed herself to be. His theory, founded upon the finding of the dressing-bag in possession of Mary Spaulding, was (he considered) correct. The Martins—father and daughter—had

assisted her, playing a double game. She had sold her jewellery, and bought new clothes. The gown spoken of as very handsome was probably that which she had provided for her sister's wedding, and worn when she went to London on that memorable Wednesday morning. She had no fads or *chiffons* of her old life to take with her. It was indeed 'a new departure.' She discarded her wedding-ring, and passed herself off as a single woman to avoid detection. For the same reason she delayed her departure from England, waiting in the best hiding-place of all the world, till the watch at railway-stations and the ordinary ports of exit should relax. America! the very land for her, with its chivalrous respect for working women, and the comparatively free market it offered for her art. *Viâ* Havre: the

route least frequented by English travellers. Fearing that she might be described as speaking French fluently, she pretended not to know the language. The man in the striped blue and gray ulster was probably Wickham Martin. She may have supposed that he betrayed her into the hands of her assailants, and consequently uttered his name with fear and reproach. It might be that she was right in this conjecture, for if he had taken the least trouble to inquire into her movements after he had left her, he must have come upon the track of the murder in the Rue Blanc. In any case, after having pretended to be her friend, he returned to play her husband's game—*and his own*. This latter would be to keep up the divorce case, and enhance the importance of his daughter's testimony therein. The shorter road to

freedom which death had opened for Sir Claude Gault (if known to his 'private solicitor') had to be carefully blocked.

So argued our Dick on the subject of most importance to him. As to the re-marriage of the twice free baronet, he was inclined to think, with the great world, that Mary Martin had him in her toils, and made him discharge her to save appearances for the trial.

But how could a timid and refined woman, such as Frances, have allowed herself to be enticed into a back slum of the port of Havre? That seemed to him the only part of the case which could not be explained. He shuddered as he thought of it. What agony of fear and horror the poor, dear, gentle woman must have suffered before the infliction of the blow which ended her unhappy but blameless

life! She was only spared one misery—that of feeling the other cowardly attack upon that which she would have held dearer than her life.

Having obtained certified copies of all the documents shown to him by the Consul, and of that officer's notes on the case, Dick returned to Dieppe determined to ascertain if Mrs. Spaulding's father answered the description given of the man in the striped ulster who accompanied the deceased; for he had not the slightest recollection of Mr. Wickham Martin's personality, although he had lent (?) him a sovereign in his salad days. Such loans were common things to this free-handed fellow in those happy times. It would certainly be well to see what he could get out of Martin, and—knowing what he now knew—of the bag.

This time he had his trip for his trouble. The whole family had removed to Paris, where Mr. Spaulding was running horses at the small race-meetings which are held around that capital every autumn.

So back to Paris Dick sped.

There were races once or twice a week at Auteuil, Cours de Vincennes, St. Germain, Château Lafitte, and other places, where Mr. Spaulding's horses were engaged, and remembering that person, whose wooden face never changed, Dick had no difficulty in 'spotting' his companion. Dick watched the pair from course to course, and gleaned this about them :

Spaulding was a man famous (let us say) for 'pulling off good things,' and having horses which were sometimes very unfortunate when the odds against them were slight. Martin had taken to gambling (on

tables) and to drink (anywhere he could get it), and was a thorn in his son-in-law's side, as he lost considerably on the wrong horses, and if let into the 'good things,' was apt to 'give them away' in the generosity begotten by wine. As he had no money of his own, Spaulding was frequently a double loser by these transactions.

Biding his time, there came a day when Dick was so fortunate as to render Mr. Martin a small service at the Pari-Mutuel, resulting in a win of forty francs, which he celebrated at a café near the railway-station with a series of drinks. He told his new-found friend, in confidence, that Spaulding was an ass. Didn't know how to run his horses or behave like a gentleman; whereas he—Martin—*was* a gentleman, and had been a famous turfite in his better days. His Aunt Jane was cousin to

the Countess of Killbarney. His family had always been gentlefolks; his only daughter was once a lady—none of your paltry knight's wives. Her husband was a baronet of the United Kingdom, who worshipped the ground she trod on, and left her all his fortune.

Dick refilled the glasses with champagne, and said :

‘ Here’s to her health !’

‘ God bless her !’ responded Martin piously, as he honoured the toast. ‘ Here’s to you ;’ and out went the sparkling amber once more.

This finished the second bottle, and Dick’s share in the operation had been about half a pint.

‘ Now for it,’ he said to himself. ‘ Your daughter is more fortunate than the first Lady Gault,’ he observed.

‘What do you know about the fir—first (hic) Lady Gault?’

‘She was murdered.’

‘In the name of God!’ exclaimed the half-tipsy man, aghast and pale, ‘how did you find that out?’

‘Never mind *how*. Frances Lady Gault was robbed and murdered, as you know.’

‘Robbed! Robbed and murdered!’ Martin repeated in a vague way. ‘I—I—don’t——’ Then his manner changed. He spoke as though to some third person, pointing a finger trembling with anger at Dick. ‘This fellow says,’ he blustered, ‘that Frances Lady Gault was robbed! D’ye hear me? Robbed and murdered!’

Dick turned, and found himself face to face with Stephen Spaulding, who had entered noiselessly, and was standing close behind him.



CHAPTER XIV.

MINE AND COUNTER-MINE.

‘Do you think it fair,’ Spaulding asked, in his cold, deliberate way, ‘to make this old man drunk, and then scare the life half out of him with your robbery and murder?’

‘And he said I knew—*I!*—when——’

‘Hold *your* tongue,’ said his son-in-law, ‘and leave this to me. My name,’ he continued, turning to Dick, ‘is Stephen Spaulding, and my wife is this foolish gentleman’s daughter. That’s why I interfere. I don’t know, and I don’t care, who you are, but I want you to leave him

alone, or it'll be the worse for you. You'll have to settle with me.'

Dick was glad to find himself unrecognised. The ex-stud-groom's tone and manner were as offensive as they could be, and this called up the white anger of the Birkett blood, with its concomitant deliberation.

'I am afraid that I cannot oblige you, sir,' he replied. 'When Mr. Martin is sober—and I do not intend to let him out of my sight till he is—I shall ask him some questions which he must answer.'

'I'll see you——' Martin began with an oath.

'Hush! that's not the way. You talk big' (this to Dick) 'with your "musts" and "shalls." Suppose I say for him what he was going to say for himself?'

'Better not, Mr. Spaulding. He might

find it less inconvenient to answer me than to be questioned by the police.'

'By the powers!' exclaimed Martin, who was sobering rapidly, as men will do under a counter-stimulant, 'this is getting tiresome. I'm not to be bullied, sir; and it's you the police shall be after if you don't give an account of yourself.'

'When I told you just now that Frances Lady Gault had been murdered, you were staggered, and you said, "In the name of God, how did you find that out?"'

'But you never answered. Leave me alone, Steeve; I know what I'm about, and I will speak!' Martin shouted, dashing aside the hand which had been laid on his mouth. 'You never answered me. You added that she had been robbed as well as murdered. Of course I was staggered. If we were in England, I'd go straight to

Scotland Yard, and get someone to make you answer me.'

'Havre is nearer than Whitehall, Mr. Martin,' said Dick quietly.

'Havre? What's Havre got to do with it?'

'Everything. Suppose we adjourn this conversation to the office of the Prefect of Police at Havre?'

At the first mention of Havre Dick noticed that both his hearers started and exchanged rapid glances.

'He will ask you,' Dick continued, 'if you arrived at that city on the morning of December 20 about six years ago, in company with a lady whom you left at the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs, and returned to Paris alone.'

'And I shall say, "Monsieur le Prefect, it is perfectly true. I did escort a lady, at

her request, to your city, and, having affairs of importance of my own to attend to, I left her there at the hotel you mention, from which she embarked the next morning for New York.”’

‘She was robbed and murdered that night in the Rue Blanc,’ said Dick.

‘Oh, nonsense! I did see something in the papers about a wretched drab being picked up in the streets, and who turned out to be English. You’ve got hold of a mare’s-nest, whoever you are. The person I escorted to Havre was a lady.’

‘Yes—Lady Gault,’ said Dick.

Martin fell back as if a bomb had exploded at his feet. Spaulding’s wooden face flushed and twitched. They looked at each other in breathless amaze. You could have lit a match on the tongue of either. Twice Martin tried to speak, but

no voice would come. Spaulding was the first to recover.

‘I suppose you are a detective?’ he asked sulkily.

‘I am engaged in detective work,’ Dick replied dryly, ‘and so far with success.’

‘Well,’ said Martin, ‘you admit that I left Havre before any murder was committed, so *I’ve* nothing to do with it.’

‘You can identify the murdered woman.’

‘No, sir,’ Martin replied, now quite sobered. ‘I was requested by my daughter to escort a young lady in whom she was interested as far as Havre, on her way to New York. I forget her name. She was a perfect stranger to me, and if—as you seem to think—she was Lady Gault in disguise, then all I can say is, that my daughter deceived me.’

‘ Lady Gault being also a perfect stranger to you,’ Dick observed dryly.

‘ Of course.’

‘ You never saw her ?’

‘ Oh, I might have seen her somewhere.’

‘ Well, I know that the lady who died in the hospital at Havre was Lady Gault, and it can be proved that she was the person you left at the hotel ; so it follows that Lady Gault was murdered.’

Martin drew a long breath, and made a sign to his son-in-law behind Dick’s back.

‘ That’s logic,’ he said, addressing Spaulding. ‘ There’s no getting over it. He says he *knows* that Lady Gault was murdered at Havre—robbed and murdered, don’t you see ? How shocked poor Mary will be when she hears it ! Now let’s go home.’

‘Not quite yet,’ Dick interposed; ‘you and your daughter will accompany me to Havre by the night train.’

‘Not if I know it,’ Spaulding blustered.

‘Better go with me than in custody of the police.’

‘What the —— have we got to do with it? Lady Gault had a right to go where she pleased, and we——’

‘Hush, hush! Sit down now,’ said Martin, ‘and don’t make a fool of yourself. This isn’t a thing to have a row about. Let’s talk it over quietly. Now’ (this to Dick), ‘what’s your game? I don’t *know*, but it may be that you’re right so far. What next? Mrs. Spaulding is not strong; this shock will upset her dreadfully. Why drag her to Havre? Why not call upon her to-morrow, when

we have broken the news, and ask her yourself if it was Lady Gault? You say you *know* it was. Suppose she don't deny it, won't you have all you want? It isn't as though she could help you to find out the murderers. There are cases in which identification of the body gives a clue; but this isn't one of them, as you know very well. You can't get at who robbed her by making a fuss about who she *is*. They were common thieves, who would have robbed anybody they could have got hold of. You catch them, and then we'll help you all we can. We'll help you anyhow on the quiet, if you will just let us know what is your game.'

As this specious old rascal argued thus, Dick thought of Sam Crawford's advice—
'No law, no prosecutions. Find Frances Lady Gault, and satisfy the Applejohns ;

they are honest people, and will believe an honest story'—and he felt that he might adopt Martin's proposition, so far as it related to Mary, but was by no means prepared to disclose 'his game.' The game (in another sense of the word) was almost in his net. If he had any witness to the admissions already made, Martin, at least, was already trapped. At present, if it came to swearing, there would be two oaths against his one. What he wanted was some independent testimony to bear out his theory that the murdered woman of the Rue Blanc was Lady Gault, and this he might get with a little craft. The rest could be left for Lord Strathfolia to deal with as he pleased. So with perfect truth he replied :

'My game? Oh, it is a very simple one, unless I am forced to make it other-

wise. I want something to show that I am right.'

'In whose interests?' insinuated Martin.

'In my own.'

'As a detective?'

'Now, don't you know that if a detective puts out an idea, and cannot substantiate it, he runs the risk of being considered too clever? I don't want to bother you or Mrs. Spaulding if I can help it; and now that you seem to be inclined to act reasonably, I'll make it easy. Give me your address in Paris' (Dick had it already), 'and I'll call, say, to-morrow about eleven o'clock, so as to get it over in time to go to the races. And as we were so lucky about that Helena mare to-day, I don't mind going in with you again, as you seem to have good tips.'

'All right,' Martin responded. 'Now

you talk sense. *We* are not going to run away. You can always find *us*. Let me see, did you give me your card ?'

'No ; unfortunately I haven't one about me. My name is Richards.'

* * * * *

'A fine day's work *you've* done, you drunken old fool !' Spaulding told his father-in-law when they were alone. 'You've ruined us !'

'Bah ! I've more sense in my head when I'm drunk than you ever had in all your sober sneaking life. Ruined us ! Why, I've spiked the only gun in the enemy's battery.'

'You've given yourself away, anyhow, with your Mexican story.'

'That was a mistake, dear boy. Just a little error arising out of imperfect information, don't you see ? And who is there to

profit by it? No one. The man is dead—killed in a cyclone at Colorado. The woman is dead—murdered at Havre: don't forget that. *She's* accounted for now. No more trouble about her. Now do you begin to understand? There was a soft spot in the divorce case, but it's cured. Sir Claude was a widower when he married Mary. The settlements are all right; the will is all right. I'm the only one in danger, and I don't care. I can run, and then you *must* give me a proper allowance,' he concluded, with a chuckle.

'I'm afraid of that man,' said Spaulding, with a chuck of his wooden head in the direction of Dick's departure. 'He came round too quick.'

'I coaxed him round; you'd have whipped him on. He's no detective—not sharp enough.'

‘Sharp enough to get the best of you at the start,’ Spaulding growled.

‘The start is not the finish, dear boy. We ought to be much obliged to Mr. Richards. I take him to be some cocky young lawyer employed by the Heath family, or perhaps by Sir Horace Gault; though what their game is—— Hold on! I wonder if any reward was ever offered for the identification of—of that woman? She had money with her, as we know.’

‘Rather, considering that you bought the bill.’

‘Payable to her order at New York. Why, that’s it!’

‘And you engaged her passage, too.’

‘I engaged a passage for a young lady, dear boy; please remember that. I did not know she was Lady Gault. Keep

this fact constantly in your memory. I did not know Lady Gault from Eve.'

'And yet you swore——'

'Leave that out!' Martin cried angrily. 'It's none of your business. I did it for Mary. I made her a lady with it, and where's the harm? Just a matter of form to satisfy a pig-headed old judge. Mind what I tell you, and don't interfere. I'll work this out with Mary.'

When Mary heard the news, and was somewhat recovered from its effects, she remembered an incident which at first had appeared trifling. The children had told her about funny Mr. Catch Rabbit and his guesses at the initials on the bag. This she repeated.

'Oh, father!' she said with pale lips and a beating heart. 'We are suspected—'

we are watched, and after all these years——’

‘You are safe at last, my child. Trust to me. Say nothing to the children, but let them be in the room alone when this man comes. We can watch and see if they recognise him.’

So Dick’s first greeting when he entered the Spaulding apartment was an honest one. Little Mary put out her hand shyly, but Agnes threw both her arms around his knees, and shouted :

‘Oh, it’s the wabbit man ! I know you. Have you cotched any more wabbits ? Mine have gwowed so big. They are at home in a hutch.’

‘I hope they are quite well ?’ Dick asked demurely.

‘Yeth ; only one had a cold in his head.’

‘The best thing for a rabbit with a cold in his head is to put his hind-legs in mustard and water, tie up his neck in an old red stocking, put him to bed, and give him a glass of hot lemonade,’ said Dr. Dick.

Both children laughed, and Dick laughed too.

There was no laughter in the next room, where Mary Spaulding watched behind a portière. She saw and heard what passed, and by a supreme effort managed to stagger into the hall-way, where her father waited, and to falter :

‘I know him. I know him by his voice. I know him by his laugh. It is Dick Birkett himself, and we are lost.’



CHAPTER XV.

‘I AM VINDICATED.’

THE children had a ‘good time’ with Dick—as all children had—interrupted only by a noise in the hall like a heavy fall. He was telling them about a beautiful princess and a wicked giant, and as the disturbance in question happened to come just as the W. G. had caught the B. P. by her lovely hair, and was going to eat her up alive, it caused the younger of his listeners some alarm, till the brave prince (who belonged to the B. P.) rode up on his enchanted horse

and cut the W. G.'s head off. Then it didn't matter.

‘Tell us some more,’ pleaded little Agnes.

Shortly after this happy ending Wickham Martin made his appearance, and told the little ones to run away to Hortense (the *bonne*), but not to go to mamma's room—poor mamma was not well.

Now, they had told Dick, in answer to conventional questionings, that mamma was very well, and papa was very well, and grandpapa was very well, only cross, and that they were to be taken that afternoon ‘to see papa's gee-gees wun waces.’

‘She is shirking,’ he thought, and then an idea flashed into his mind.

The children had recognised him. They would probably have told about the rabbit incident. Suspicion would attach, and

Mary, with her woman's instincts, might see through the changes of six years and find him out. If he could get what he wanted without her seeing him, it would be very well indeed.

'I am sorry to say,' Martin began, 'that my daughter has met with rather a serious accident. Knowing how the children tease strangers, she was hurrying to relieve you of them, when she tripped on these confounded slippery boards and fell heavily. You must have heard her fall.'

Dick expressed his regret, and cautiously came to his point. Yes, he hoped she would be quite recovered by to-morrow; but unfortunately he had to leave Paris that night. Would she mind writing him just a line, saying that it was Lady Gault whom he (Martin) had accompanied to Havre?

‘Let us play *cartes sur la table*, Mr. Richards,’ Martin replied. ‘We had a long talk about you here last night, and have come to the conclusion that you must be acting in the interests of the gentleman—now Lord Wadehurst—who is supposed to have eloped with the first Lady Gault. Frankness for frankness—is this so? Well, you need not answer. I see from your manner that we were right.’

‘You certainly made me start by such a question ; but——’

‘Tut, tut, tut, my dear fellow ! We are alone. The admission cannot hurt you—or your employer. Your object is to exculpate Lord Wadehurst, and why should we not help you, if we can ? But you have undertaken an almost hopeless task.’

‘I do not consider it hopeless.’

‘Of course not. The longer it lasts, the

better the pay, eh? It might be an annuity for you.’

‘Lord Wadehurst is not a rich man, Dick replied. ‘I should like to close my share in the matter as quickly as possible.’

‘Your share? Then he has someone else in it?’

‘No; everything is in my hands.’

‘Has he told you about the divorce case, *Gault v. Gault and Birkett*?’

‘I know all about that.’

‘Hum—m! What does he say about my share in it?’

‘Really, Mr. Martin, we are wandering from the object of my visit. If Mrs. Spaulding will be good enough to write——’

‘Stop a moment! I’m not going to let her be distressed and worried for nothing. Suppose she says it was Lady Gault, and

you can show that she is dead—that would do you no good. The lady was a month in London, hiding. How do you know she was not with your client? How do you know that she didn't go to Havre to meet him?’

‘We can prove that Lord Wadehurst was at sea, bound for Barbadoes, two hours before Lady Gault was seen in London.’

‘Sure?’

‘Certain.’

‘Why hasn't he come out with this?’

‘He had no chance.’

‘You must admit, Mr. Richards, that appearances were strongly against him,’ Martin observed, in his most insinuating manner. ‘On our side, we do not deny that we concealed some part of the truth, as it appeared to us. Considering the fact that there was an elopement, it did not

seem to matter how it was carried out. There was a compromising letter, you know. We were in total ignorance of your — of your client's movements, don't you see? We concluded that he might have joined her at Havre or New York.'

'Or in Mexico,' Dick added dryly.

'It would be interesting,' said Martin, without a change of countenance, 'to learn what Lord Wadehurst thinks about—Mexico.'

'He is advised,' replied Dick, 'that Mexico is an interesting country, but inhabited by unreliable people. He is not disposed at present to rely upon travellers' tales.'

'What's that?' (quickly). 'Does he say so himself?'

Martin bent forward and looked Dick in the face with keen and trembling interest.

‘ He says that if other things go right, there will be no occasion to enter into—Mexico.’

Martin leaned back in his chair and drew a long, clear breath.

‘ His lordship is perhaps aware that he was reported dead—killed in a cyclone ?’

‘ That was a mistake.’

‘ Of course, of course it was ; but it led to others which would not have happened if he had been known to be alive. He ought not to bear malice for these, Mr. Richards.’

‘ He is advised to take no notice of them.’

‘ Ah ! but we do not always follow advice. What do you say yourself—will he act up to this ?’

‘ As far as I can answer, I say he will.’

‘ Good. What do you want my daughter to write ?’

‘ Something like this : “ It is true that the person who was escorted to Havre by my father on the 21st of December, 1884, and left by him at the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs, was Frances, the wife of Sir Claude Gault, of Fairlock.” That will be enough.’

‘ Not quite, I think. We must put ourselves straight, Mr. Richards. Do you mind writing it yourself? I doubt if Mrs. Spaulding can do more than sign her name, she is so shaken by her fall. Come to the window. There are writing materials here, on her desk.’

Dick obeyed, and on paper marked ‘ 21, Rue de la Fontaine, Dieppe,’ wrote as he had already suggested, and at Martin’s dictation added this much more :

‘My father supposed that she was a young friend of mine; and we did not know of her death until informed by the gentleman who is acting for Lord Wadehurst. This gentleman pledges his word of honour that Lord Wadehurst, in return for this information, will not molest any member of my family on account of past transactions.’

‘Your last paragraph is rather strong,’ Dick said, as he blotted the page. ‘How can I bind Lord Wadehurst?’

‘I will trust to his lordship’s sense of honour,’ Martin replied loftily. ‘I am doing him an invaluable service, and I might—well, never mind. Let sleeping dogs lie, Mr. Richards.’

With this warning Martin left the room with the paper for his daughter’s signature, and Mr. Spaulding withdrew silently from

behind the portière, where he had overheard the whole of the foregoing conversation.

'Was ever anything so lucky?' Dick thought when left alone 'My blessing on all parquet floors and the fellows who scrub them slippery! What a cropper she came! It shook the house. Oh, my darling!' he cried out of the great joy which filled him, 'my darling, whose trusting heart would not admit a *stain*, your sweetest prayer is answered. The *sorrow* has passed, and I can go back, in honour, to beg for your love.'

In the course of a few minutes Martin returned with the paper signed in a rather shaky hand, 'Mary Spaulding,' and by himself as a witness to her signature.

'I am sorry that I cannot go with you to the races, as I proposed yesterday,'

Dick said, as he pocketed the priceless document. 'I have to pack up.'

'I don't think we shall go, either,' Martin replied. 'Spaulding is very anxious about his wife. She is badly hurt—worse than we thought at first.'

'Oh, I hope not!'

Our Dick was too happy for one unkind thought. He almost forgave her father, with all his rascality. At last he was acting honestly. But Dick had not plumbed *all* Mr. Wickham Martin's rascality by many fathoms.

He had, however, told the truth about Mary. She was seriously hurt. The slippery parquet might have had something to do with her fall; but the *causa causans* was the shock she received at seeing the supposed dead alive and laughing with her children.

Fortunately for all concerned, the plan of campaign had been arranged the night before; and the discovery that Mr. Richards was Lord Wadehurst in the flesh—astounding as it was—afforded only some minor movements. The general idea was to admit the identity of the woman murdered at Havre with Lady Gault in return for some act of indemnity in the interests of the family at large. Shrewd plotter as he was, Martin saw in a moment that Dick must not be recognised, but be treated with as Mr. Richards, and in that capacity made to say things which would bind Lord Wadehurst in the hearing of a witness. Even the rascals know the force of these two words, *noblesse oblige*. So it made little difference to these whether Mary said what was agreed upon, or wrote it No

use could be made of the admission without revealing the condition under which it was given, and this was made so vague as to confess nothing.

‘Our position,’ Martin explained afterwards, to comfort his daughter, ‘is changed only for the better. In the first place, Lady Gault is accounted for—do you understand? She cannot now come back from anywhere to trouble us. You have never said that she ran away with young Birkett. You only swore to what passed between them that night in the shrubbery at Fairlock. Now it has come out that you helped to hide her, and got her away to America. You did not know that Birkett hadn’t joined her there. He gave himself away with that letter ; and how he is going to get over it *I* don’t know ! That’s *his* business. The worst that can

be said is that you didn't tell all the truth ; but you were not asked, and, as things showed, it didn't matter. You're all right, and so am I. You ought to be happy and grateful when you think of all that your poor old father has done for you.'

'If I could only undo it,' she murmured, clasping her hands, 'I would give up all I have in the world—everything except my children—if I could undo it!'

'Nonsense!' Martin replied angrily. 'We've done nothing we can undo. We have just followed the acts of others (for which we are not responsible), and taken advantage of them, as we had a right to do.'

'I have cast shame upon a virtuous lady—my dear, gentle mistress, who never said a cross word to me. I have helped to ruin an honourable man. I have con-

nived at murder—yes, it was as bad as murder! And all for money!’

‘Hush, Mary dear!—hush, my child!’ her father whispered. ‘Your fall has unnerved you. You mustn’t speak like that! Suppose someone were to overhear you?’

‘Father, I *must* confess before I die!’

‘Very well, my dear. Get well, and wait till I am dead. Then you can ruin yourself, and your husband, and your children whenever you please. Now try to go to sleep, and wake up in your right mind.’

He spoke lightly out of the wealth of his cunning, which told him it was of no use to argue with her when in one of these moods. And it did not require a fall to bring them on. They came of themselves, and were becoming more and more

frequent. He hoped that the assurances of safety which he could now give would set her mind at rest, and was disturbed at the result. This was the first time she had ever uttered the word 'confess,' and it startled him. His love for her had never abated. It held the one untainted spot in his whole composition. It blinded him to all else than what he supposed to be her happiness, or took for her interests. He had made her a lady; he had made her rich; and there she lay, all her beauty gone, wringing her poor thin hands, and the tears streaming down her faded face. He turned away with those light words on his lips, and his heart sank within him. Was this to be the end: confession — death — and ruin?

* * * * *

Dick will be in London as fast as steam can take him ; but no engine runs fast enough for his news. Just a little clicking of a key, and Sam Crawford knows it.

‘ I am vindicated. Start to-night,’ runs the message. There are two more words in the one to Percy Stanring, and these are, ‘ *Tell her.*’

He sends for King Pippin, and that now tranquil animal takes him to Wood End, by no means for the first time, and nothing loath. His neck will be patted and his nose rubbed by the prettiest hand in Hopshire, but that does not so much matter to him. The hand will not be empty. There will be apples, or sugar, or cake in it, for isn’t he Dick’s horse ? and hasn’t Dick exorcised the devils who once possessed him, and, therefore, isn’t his present

state of grace a part of Dick? The curate has been as warmly welcomed, after his kind, for is not he Dick's friend?—his loyal friend, poor fellow! The pinky paper which, without dismounting, he hands to Stella is the death-warrant of a hope which might have grown strong in a less faithful heart. So he rides away, to Pippin's deep disgust. No sugar to-day for him.

After one glance at the pinky paper, Stella darts back to the house like a startled leveret. Oh, if she can only get to her room without observation, and be alone—all alone for hours—with her joy! She does escape, and stands there breathless, with the patent of Dick's highest nobility crushed against her bursting bosom—'*I am vindicated. Tell her.*'

She does not fall on her knees, or clasp

her hands, or follow any conventional formula of prayer and praise. She *thinks* (for her heart is too full for utterance), 'Oh, you GOOD God!' And it may be that no cathedral choir ever sent up a more perfect pæan of thanksgiving.

We have seen her stand up like a young pythoness, and declare—defiantly, triumphantly—that Dick would come back 'in honour'; but that was when all the world seemed to be against him. It is different now. He is vindicated. He is coming back like a conqueror, his enemies chained to the wheels of his chariot, with stern-browed Justice by his side, demanding reparation for his wrongs. And it would come swiftly. Honourable men and good women would press forward to take his hand with congratulations or

apology. Hers is the joy which makes fear.

‘What have I done for him?’ she muses. ‘What place is there for me in his triumph? I am only a simple little girl, who love him with all my soul.’

And yet—and yet—the message was for her! Back she flew in memory to the old quarry on bleak Thorley Chart, and thought of the words his misery had unloosed. Had he forgotten them? What would he think of her if he had not? Once she was proud of the part she had played; but now?

‘Oh!’ she cried aloud, ‘how can I meet him? How can I find courage to look into his dear face again?’

With these fears unabated, she went down and handed Mark Applejohn the pinky paper.

‘It is a telegram,’ she told him calmly,
‘from Lord Wadehurst.’

You will observe that he is not ‘Dick’
now.

END OF VOL. II.

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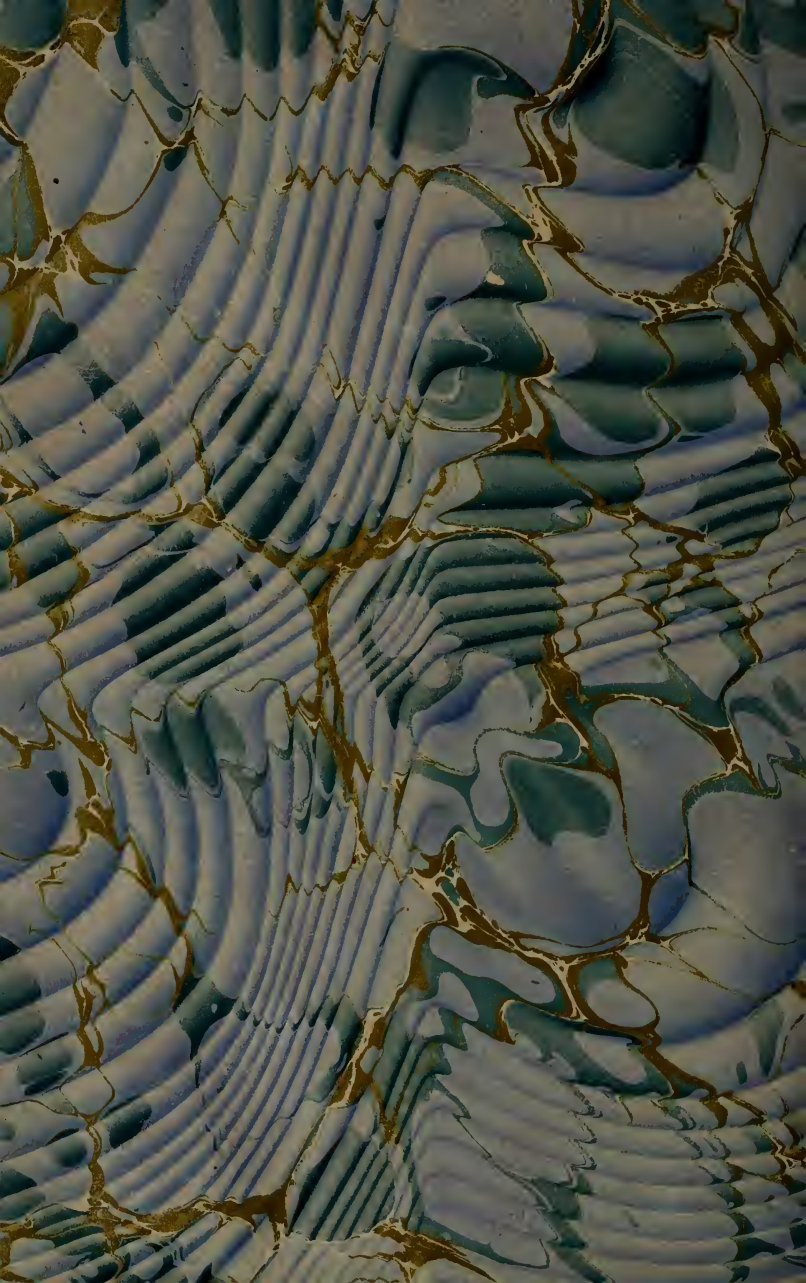














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